

PUBLISHED BY TELEKINETIC PRESS



Val D'Orazio

THE END OF THE VAMPIRE CRAZE IN NEW YORK CITY

BOOK ONE

THE END OF THE VAMPIRE CRAZE IN NEW YORK CITY, Book One

2016 Edition Published by Telekinetic Press

Story and characters copyright 2004-2006 by Val D'Orazio

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the author.

INTRODUCTION

I wrote this book in 2004 while going through prescription drug withdrawals. Just in case you were wondering.

PROLOGUE

Malcolm needed to get hooked up with a powerful warlock with a talent for raising the dead – and fast. He hadn't much time. Of course, Malcolm himself was a warlock (as well as a Luciferian, magician, debunker, and occasional necromancer), but he had blown his magickal wad on obtaining the body in the first place. Besides, he was in no mental shape to undertake such a task by himself. He looked like shit, and hadn't slept in days. His normally slight frame looked even slighter, lost in the red and black flannel jacket with the black leather vest over it that he wore; both items, like his jeans, worn to holes and infused with the melancholy funk of several hard weeks. His fine dirty-blond hair had thinned out on top to the very threshold of pattern baldness, and this was achieved, much like with the platinum encroaching on his roots, within a relatively short amount of time. Malcolm was never an especially fit man – unlike his hero Aleister Crowley he had never gotten his body to the shape where he could climb a mountain or attempt a Yogan *asana* – but now his furred cheeks hung gaunt and his entire face drawn softly downward by gravity. Looking at him you would have never known that this was the Thelemite Dandy that stalked the Bowery and Soho twenty years ago, or even the well-tended, professorly type that waxed cynical on the topic of magic and the paranormal for local TV news stations and newspapers only last Summer.

He was in particularly great demand in those days, the days of the vampire scare in New York City. Dust had scoffed at such claims of bloodsuckers stealing children off street corners and attacking NYU students – it was just the culture's way of dealing with the banalities of human evil. Malcolm hadn't seen a vampire yet when he said such things, though in retrospect he realized it just wasn't his time yet. Oh sure, he heard of the Khepriian Charge, heard of the arts of Thaumaturgy and the rumors of the existence of those who were immortal and beautiful and fed on human blood. He thought the feeding thing was only a

metaphor, some sort of alchemist's shorthand for human sacrifice to Satan or a rather kinky ritual drinking of bodily fluids. And then Tara Amadeo had dropped by his shop babbling about some nonsense, that she had battled several vampires simultaneously. But Tara had said a *lot* of things. If he had believed Tara, she had received her own powers not from the Studies themselves but some sort of actual portal to Lucifer, some inborn freaking *Omenesque* taint in her DNA – which was absolute rubbish, because he had been practicing and researching the Craft from before she was even born, and in all the literature there was not even the slightest mention of such a situation, and even where it was most very gently intimated it referred to some great Anti-Christ type figure, someone of importance and renown – not a drunken, ill-mannered wannabe skank like Tara Amadeo.

And now Tara was dead.

Malcolm staggered up St. Mark's, his eyes slightly fixed to the ground and his consciousness sightless, until he reached the McDonald's next to The Continental. He had made a lunch-date with one of the old-time wizards of the area, Thane Cockrum. Thane was in the area doing magick way back in the 70s, at the crossroads between the hippy paganists and the first movement of the chaos-punks; but he was always his own man, and indeed spawned hundreds of pretenders. Malcolm was surprised he was still alive – and that Thane, for all his heavy magick and elaborate, drug-assisted conjuring, had managed to get into less overall trouble with the gods than he himself had currently found.

Thane sat at a greasy counter, a large steaming tray of Chicken McNuggets before him and his gnarled walking stick with the silver dragon's claw handle at his side. He had long, stringy brown/black hair that was parted slightly left of the middle and which framed his rather serene, jowled face. His dark eyes were as deep and baggy as a hound dog's – but unlike Malcolm's drawn features it didn't tell of unhealth and disorder but simply of the accumulation of years. Thane wore a black T-shirt with a faded ad for an obscure bar somewhere in Cape Cod; both his arms were completely covered in tattoos – some occult and some merely naughty – and when he spotted Malcolm shuffling in he raised one

of them in a greeting that looked not unlike that of Queen Elizabeth's.

Malcolm nodded slightly at his old contact in recognition and collapsed into the seat across.

"*Mal*," Thane said in his throaty, phlegmy voice. "What happened to you? You look positively *miasmic*."

"A lot went down," he replied, his face staring at the white Formica counter dotted in spilt ketchup. "You can't even begin to fucking imagine." Then he looked up at Thane with his watery, unfocused blue eyes in desperation. "I'm going to need some help."

"Well *shit*, Mal, if you're in a jam I can certainly..."

"Naw, Thane. What I need would end up killing you. No offense."

"No offense taken – I'm always for not dying if I don't have to."

"Yeah, well, I kind of wish I had your good sense."

"These nuggets are for you, by the way."

"Thanks."

Malcolm's pale fingers crawled into the tray and idly approached a golden nugget. Just the thought of the process of eating felt to Malcolm as if it would resume his vomiting. Then again, McDonald's always kind of did that to him.

"So what are you looking for, exactly?"

"I need a first-class necromancer. Basically, I need to raise the dead."

Thane's tiny brownish-red eyes widened slightly in their sockets – he hadn't heard this request from anybody in a long long time...and such seekers were either already in a shitload of trouble or would be soon jumping into one.

"*Christ*. Don't you know that shit deals with the very warp and weft of reality?"

"Thane, reality is already really fucked up right now. I'm talking Swiss-cheese *Star Trek the Next Generation* Frank-Lynch-on-crack bullshit. It couldn't get any worse. Trust me."

"But why do you need to be screwing with reanimation now? What'd you do?"

Malcolm swallowed hard and set his lower jaw tightly.

"I...I have a body in my apartment," he said in a low voice, leaning in.

"Ehrm...someone you know?"

"Yeah..."

"D'you kill him?"

"It's a *her*," Malcolm said dejectedly, biting into the nugget with his small yellowed teeth.

Thane thoughtfully scratched his left elbow, where there was marked a tattoo of a hot-rodding eight ball with fangs. "Did you kill he..."

Suddenly Malcolm's whole body tensed, his back muscles sort of leaping up around his neck as if he was to pounce.

"You don't understand," he shakily declared in a slightly raised voice that threatened to break out of the regular proletariat hum of the joint and be noticed. "You don't understand the circumstances. The fucking world almost ended. Don't you remember that? Several weeks ago? Around Easter?"

"Ostara?"

"Easter, Ostara, Passover, whenever – *gah!* – Thane, don't you pick up these things? Y'know, the dark rumblings of the Force and all that shit?"

"Last week? Yeah...actually, there was some unusual *crow* activity...some blood in the stool of the world, so to speak. But I didn't think that much of it – I've gotten to the point in my life where I live and let goddess, you know? I just trust in the Universe to handle it."

"*Trust in the Universe*, huh?" Malcolm asked, his familiar cynical expression pouring over his face as he sat back in his seat and thrust his arms into the pockets of his jacket. "But who are the universe's 'little helpers,' eh? Who does the *dirty work*?" His face grew grim and his mouth tightened around his teeth as his small body leaned in again. "I got *fucked!*" He tapped his index finger fierce on the counter for emphasis. "Completely fucked! And the Nine did it. And now I've got the body of Tara Amadeo in the basement of my store. And I'm bringing her back."

"Shit, Tara's dead? *Oh...*" Thane cast his eyes to the side in bewilderment, his mouth gently hanging open. "Man, this enlightenment jazz really eats your

time.”

“So anyway – I need a good contact. Pretty damn soon.”

“I guess the body’s starting to get a bit...*stinking*?”

“No, it’s pretty dried and charred, actually. Keeps real well, like a basket full of potpourri. No, it’s just that I...borrowed it from the Nine, and I really have to get moving on this before they get wise.”

“And then you *steal* from the NINE?!” His tattooed hands touched the table lightly as if it was a piano. “I hate to tell you this, Mal, but they probably already know.”

“Yeah,” Malcolm replied with a long sigh, running his fingers through his thinning hair and prompting several strands to fall upon the counter. “Most likely waiting to jump out of the bushes and nail my dick to the wall at any second. It’s a drag.”

“Alright...alright, so. You want to bring your girlfriend back from the dead?”

Malcolm’s face took on an expression that looked like a cross between a laugh and being stomped in the gonads.

“*Girlfriend*? No...no, not at all. I’m just paying debts, is all, trying to do the right, karmic thing.”

“You picked a fine time to start.”

“Yeah, well, better late than never, huh?” Malcolm tossed his head back and silently chuckled to himself for a few seconds. Then he smiled at Thane maniacally, fanning his outstretched hands, palms-out, before him like Eddie Cantor. “Or perhaps I’m just a little...*insane*. At the moment.”

“Mal – this is a lot of tack to be laying on to me all at once. It’s a heap to digest, y’know? I mean – how in the hell did this all start in the first place?”

“It’s a long fucking convoluted story.”

“I’ve got time.”

CHAPTER ONE: FEEDING THE GODS

It's all about feeding the Gods. They will give, and they will give, and they will give – but they must be fed.

Tara was the type of child that stared at shoes a lot. A boyish girl, too girl to be boy, a developing body & sexuality with no framework whatsoever. See her skittering down the granite bubblegum-stained steps of her junior high school, a beanpole with rounded shoulders, her boy's Levis and a faded red sweatshirt effectively rendering her frame genderless; a lank bob the hue of dirt pushed away from her owl-like, bespectacled eyes with a series of old bobby-pins. She kept her head down in the intense hope that the girls in their skintight acid wash jeans and monster Aqua-Net hair wouldn't notice her; their madly chirping voices speaking in the arcane language of dating & the mysteries of boys. She used to get teased by them all the time – in gym, in the halls, behind her in Math, as she passed by them on those very granite steps. They were never her kind. She knew she was different, other. But how could she – timid, poor, soft-spoken, socially awkward – possibly defend herself? She kept her faith in God. You know, "vengeance is mine saith the Lord," and all that jazz. God would take care of it. God would take care of her. She waited on the will of Christ. She accepted things as they came; accepted that even though things were much less than ideal, it would all make sense one day and have a divine purpose to it. It was not up to her to fight back or interfere with that plan in any way.

Then she entered the University and met Molly Griep.

*** **

And then she came home one day and told her mother that she'd be in her room for a while and wanted to have some privacy. Usually such a bold

admonition would alarm said parent and ignite their suspicions – in this case the parent of a 19-year-old adult. But Tara had it covered – she demurely flashed the top-half of a Playgirl magazine from within its crinkled brown-paper sheath. Mother was pleased: her daughter, despite all appearances to the contrary, was not a dyke.

Yet in spite of Mom's tacit approval of Tara's implied masturbation the girl could not afford to take any chances. Once safely ensconced within her lair she proceeded to remove the lamp and toiletries (such as they were: a comb, a Tupperware filled with Q-Tips, and some never-used three-year-old LA Looks mousse) from her bureau and painstakingly slid the furniture in front of the door. She wasn't sure what she'd have done if her mother had ever tried to come in; probably blow out the candles and shove the whole thing under her bed.

Tara then proceeded to pluck the various elements of her altar from their hiding-places. Some were hidden in plain sight – the sacred circle was drawn from the chalk in her art box, and candles were pretty ubiquitous (except for the black votives, those she kept wrapped in tissue paper at the back of her underwear drawer). The athame was a butter knife (but with a really nice handle) that she secreted under her mattress – she figured she could tell Mom that it was kept there in case a murderer broke into the house. The incense and herbs – they seemed pretty “druggy” looking, so the girl took special care to stash those in the bowels of a hollowed-out stuffed polar-bear. And the grimoires – slap some Menudo “Just Say No” book-covers she got in school & nobody would be the wiser.

But there would be a new element to the ritual that night. Because that night Tara would make a specific request of the Gods – she was going to ask for skills in Glamoury. Before, she and the gods were just bullshitting with each other: I do this, You do that, I push this checker here, You tip that domino over there. The food requested, nay, demanded – some cakes, a few sacrifices of personal belongings (break something valuable, bye bye My First Barbie) – quite doable & she never gave it a second thought. Then things started getting a little deeper & the issue of blood came up. In all the grimoires, in all the spells &

incantations – always the blood. At first she simply skipped over this ingredient, trying to pull a Catholic Mass on Them and substitute red wine. But *They* knew-- and Tara knew that They knew because she could just feel it. And so then when she started using her menses, well...it worked for a little while. It was pretty intense in and of itself, she thought, and quite impressive. But then even that wasn't enough. Despite Crowley's dictate that menstrual blood was the most potent of all ritual claret spillings – even than that of a virgin boy of noble breeding – the Gods weren't buying it. No, They weren't buying it.

And Tara wasn't going to kill an animal or a human or anything like that, because in her mind there was a clear difference between the merely infernal and quite obviously evil. Molly Griep (one of the most powerful mages that ever lived, in Tara's estimation) said that the Black Magickians of Yore who conducted human sacrifices were just a bunch of pussies – no sense of personal responsibility. She felt that the Witch should “own” her experiences, her sacrifices – and in so doing, the power would increase and the vessel strengthened. Of course, lately Molly was entertaining the idea of possibly bringing a small animal into their rituals...and later, after the affair in Luna Park, the stakes were brought somewhat higher. Luna Park had changed everything, changed things in ways neither of the young women could suspect. But I'm getting ahead of myself. The important thing was that yes – the magick was real. The possibilities: probably endless. And so Tara was going behind Molly's back and calling the corners on her own; she felt a little guilty, because Molly was her “Obi Wan” after all. But Tara had of late suspected that she herself had a great deal of power – and also that Molly didn't really know that much of what she was doing. But it was dear that it was Molly who opened the door for her to the Others. The chain of divinities in Tara's short life: Mama, Mr. Rogers, Christ, Molly, and now the Others. The Gods.

So the Gods clamored to be fed, and the girl dared not invoke them without a meal waiting. She really hated to do this, but it seemed to be the only way.

A fresh razor-blade, a bottle of alcohol, some gauze, and masking tape.

Shit.

*** **

Tara drew the circle, about four feet in diameter, upon the worn, splintery planks of her wooden floor, carefully inscribing a pentagram within its circumference. Superimposed upon the star she drew a smaller circle, and quartered it with a cross; she designated the four directions, and placed each symbol of the four elements upon its proper place. North: Earth, a bowl of salt. East: Air, the smoke of burning incense. South: Fire, a red candle. West: Water, a bowl of water. And to finish it off, a black candle placed at the very top point of the pentagram; the girl lit the candles, closed the light, and carefully climbed in. To the left of her were her open grimoires, athame placed on top of them; to her right were the razor, alcohol, gauze, tape, and a favorite glass unicorn. She took up the athame and began.

“I put up a barrier of protection around this circle,” she said, drawing a circle in the air around her, clockwise, with the athame, “that no spirit but those I wish may enter.” In her mind she pictured vividly the point of the knife cutting into the very fabric of reality itself, the sticky light of creation pouring out in fresh, cosmic globs, forming a shield around her body. (Of course, without the proper knowledge of shielding and without the thorough researching of the exact spirits she was bidding enter, it was all just about as useful as a crusty eight-year-old condom).

She then addressed each class of elementals, dipping her athame within its representative in the circle:

“Hail to the Pillars of the East, to the element of Air and the Spirits of Invention: hear my prayer!

“Hail to the Pillars of the South, to the element of Fire and the Spirits of Passion: hear my prayer!

“Hail to the Pillars of the West, to the element of Water and the Spirits of Intuition: hear my prayer!

“Hail to the Pillars of the North, to the element of Earth and the Spirits of Nature: hear my prayer!”

A palatable creepiness entered the darkened room, an itch and a creak and a near-silent squawk that all had significance to the girl. They were on the threshold, They were coming...

“I, your faithful student Tara, have called You here today to firstly thank You for all that You have shown me & have done for me over the many years! As always: I am in Your debt, and continue to hope and pray that I might be able to repay You for the unlimited vistas and opportunities You have opened to me!

“Today I ask You to grant me a Talent, one I feel I am ready to wield. Specifically, I wish to own the powers of Glamoury – that I may cast convincing illusions. In return, I am prepared to make the appropriate *sacrifices*...”

She placed the glass unicorn before her in the center of the circle, in the heart of the pentagram and the axis of the elements. Tara had received it for her First Communion. Needless to say, she had never made it to Confirmation.

“*This* I give to You, Gods!”

And with that she picked up one of the heavier grimoires and smashed the unicorn to atoms, feeling a degree of regret as she did so. Tara supposed the Gods found the remorse tasty.

“And now I give to You, my *Essence*...”

The girl removed the thin brown cardboard covering from the blade. Fresh. Sterile? She couldn't take any chances. She poured a little bit of the alcohol on the razor. Tara was so cautious back then. She didn't think she could afford any infections. Or explanations. Perhaps the Gods didn't appreciate the prudery; she never really got anything big until she learned to stop worrying about her life. At the moment Tara was scared to death, but managed to nick the meat of her palm, just below the thumb, with the blade. It was an unsteady, curved path, almost like a “C”, and she flinched at the way the skin fell under the weight of the blood, a little red-black pool forming and starting to overflow almost immediately. *Would it ever heal without stitches?* she silently wondered to herself, aghast.

Tara let the thick red fluid drip over the shards of glass, at the heart of the

pentagram, in the axis of the elements. Healthy, heavy drops.

"I give his to You! I'm giving this to You! Eat! Eat! I invoke you! I Invoke you!"

Just then – the subtle groan of the floorboards right outside her door. She could hear her mother breathing at the other end of that door, could feel her proximity. The girl's stomach knotted.

"Ohhh...oh, yeah," Tara moaned, *"Tom Cruise I love you! Oh, Tom...oh Tom..."*

Mother went away, she felt her leave. The girl wondered if this distraction broke up the spell, bent it in some way. There had to be no interruption. The circle could not be broken.

She looked down at the wound she had made. Her palm stung a little, but not as much as she thought it would sting. Tara squeezed the rest of the blood out with her other hand as if it was a slice of lemon and made the remainder of the invocations under her breath. In the dark, she could not see just how red and stained that center was, what a mess she had to look forward to cleaning up.

*** **

And when it's all over, you feel a change.

*** **

In 1997, on one fine Winter's day in January, Tara Amadeo found herself in the warm apartment of a clutch of rich young women near Columbia U. The witch knew the type: leggy, sophisticated, willowy stalks of bulimia. One of the girls had apparently lost the love of her life to some big truckdriver-type butch named Marta. What pissed the jilted lover off more – that she lost her girlfriend, or that despite her many crunches & upchucked lunches she lost her girlfriend to a chunky chick?

Tara sat in a purple suede easy chair, the girls to her left on the brown

leather couch. She felt like Johnny Carson – the freak holding court. The witch with the long brown hair and coffee-colored lipstick poured the contents of her bag out atop the replica journey-beaten Tibetan trunk from ABC Carpet – a clay pentacle, crystals, cards, cowries, feathers, and an athame (and this pointy devil weren't no butter knife). The girls provided the incense in the fragrance of cannabis; they offered Tara a toot but she declined, citing that her aura must be pure during the working (they didn't need to know that as a result of her many years of magickal practice her nervous system was so goddamned sensitive that pot or any other drug would have sent her batshit).

She proceeded to set up her ritual items. Tara no longer really needed those trinkets, but they were good for show. She also really didn't need to wear the leather pants (uncomfortable, crotch-sore, great way to get a yeast infection), or the black peasant-shirt with the Romantic flowing sleeves (great way to set yourself on fire when working with candles), or the multiple chains and chokers with pentagrams, mother-goddesses, runes, and other occult symbols up the yin-yang (felt rather silly) – but she needed to convince them that she was real. And it would get *realler*.

The girl who hired the witch, Elaine, had her chocolate-brown hair, professionally streaked with yellow and auburn, all swept up in an Audrey Hepburn 'do; she was so groomed and bottle-tanned and perfect with her snub-nose and her pink honey-smacked lips. All the girls were perfect, as (The) Real World-perfect as they and their parents' wallets could possibly deliver: Tanya, the faux-California blond with the mannish face but a killer body courtesy of Bally Fitness and saline solution; and Deonna, a Black chick with thin beaded strings of Alicia Keys braids hanging out of a Hermes scarf, rail-thin and raw skin on her forefinger. The Girls of Apt. 4C: all perfect, all slim, all tight, all moneyed – they weren't that far off from those girls who teased Tara in school, actually (you know, if those girls in school had ate pussy on a regular basis). And now they were paying her. To further damn her soul. And theirs. There's a lesson in here, somewhere.

No doubt about it – love spells & hexes on bitches you hate is a

dangerous dance. Didn't do much good for nobody, other than maybe buying you a few more fucks with your ex-lover or delivering the heady but fleeting buzz of revenge. It's all fleeting. The witch never fixed things. She never promised to fix things. You couldn't fix things with what she could do.

"But she was so *fat*," Elaine wailed from behind her long, tapered, finely manicured fingers. "How could Alison leave me for somebody like that? She wasn't even into thickness or butches – *ever!* What did I do? I miss her so much I can't stand it – *I want to die!*"

Wah, wah, wah, Tara thought, rolling her eyes as she finished building the impromptu altar. You have to forgive her if she didn't seem like the most empathetic of souls, but she had heard this all a hundred times before. And the lesbians seemed to take these things especially hard. Maybe it was because they didn't expect this sort of treacherous shit from women, only guys. Men, women – they were all fallen creatures to one degree or another, in the witch's opinion. She felt that to be attached to someone so much was a fatal mistake. And for Elaine to be so insanely heartbroken over this Alison that she stooped so low as to hire a *brujah* – it was pretty pathetic, but it kept Tara's rent paid.

She lit the black candle, and requested that the lights be shut off.

"You have the personal belongings?" the witch asked Elaine without looking up from her work.

She handed Tara a picture of Alison and a red bandana that Marta had sloppily (arrogantly?) left over the house. Alison looked sort of good-natured, a tall skinny golden-haired lass leaning against a fence; corn-fed big-toothed Wisconsin-stock. The witch couldn't help but take a quick whiff of Marta's bandana; it smelt gently of death, which should have been her first warning.

Tara placed the picture & the bandana upon the clay pentacle and began her circle-casting, her corner-calling, some preliminary invocations. Deonna snickered a little bit from her perch.

"*What are you trying to fucking do, get us all killed?*" the witch growled at her loudly, making all three women jump. Not that she really thought the Gods cared all that much, but the woman had an ego to uphold.

She continued with some mumbo-jumbo, some cantos in Enochian, and when that was all over with she got to the meat of the ritual, a simple “You do for me and I give You food.” That’s all magick is.

“Curse, curse, curses upon the head of this vile woman, this sneak and cheat, the wearer of this cloth, the woman named Marta! May a fine green leprous growth foam upon her skin, reminding her of the pain she caused the fair and innocent Elaine! And may the woman Alison (confused but noble creature) see the error of her ways and come back to her true love Elaine, and may they all live together and forever in a pure state of love and passion! This I ask of thee, oh, mighty Spirits, oh Goddesses of the Sphere, oh Diana, Hecate, Kali, oh Mighty Isis, oh Cerridwen & Brigit & Pele – *hear my plea*! In return, I offer you...”

Tara grabbed the athame, pulled back her sleeve – revealing a series of scars that traveled up her arm and laced her palm like train tracks – and slashed the side of her forearm. The girls immediately squealed in terror, their legs and arms squinching against the leather of the sofa. It was a good flow, thick claret spatter upon the bandana, the photo, the pentacle. She needent have been so dramatic in her bloodletting, but as with her clothes and baubles, the element of theater was part of the price of admission.

“*Oh my God,*” Elaine cried from behind her long fingers, “oh my Godddd!!! You *cut* yourself! You didn’t tell me you were going to do this! I didn’t know you were going to do this! Shit!”

The witch’s arm – warm winding stripe of red trailing to the elbow – was bent and held out in front of her like a freshly-scrubbed surgeon’s. She turned to Elaine and rolled her eyes; this is what Tara got from currying employment from respectable people.

“*Look* – you hired a witch to use diabolical means in order to get your girl back and get revenge. That’s what you did. This isn’t ‘Practical Magic.’ I’m not Sandra Bullock. I’m not a Ya Ya Sister. We’re bargaining with *Gods*, here. Be thankful this isn’t your *own* arm.”

But Tara’s soothing words failed to quell the rising tide of panic that began to engulf Elaine.

"You're fucking bleeding on my couch!!!"

"I'm not bleeding anywhere near your damn couch. Calm the fuck down."

"That's it...ritual over...is it over? Make it over! Shit! Oh...fuck!"

Tanya, not quite as ruffled as her roomie, sat up and craned her head towards the witch.

"Um...do you, like, need a *Band-aid*," she asked, tucking a strand of hair calmly behind her ear.

"Nah...I heal up pretty ok."

As I mentioned before, a side-effect to Tara's long-term magick usage was...*adjustments* to her physiology. She healed quite a bit faster than a regular person; already her cut was crusting over. She often wondered if the Gods purposely granted her this ability in order to facilitate her bleeding for their benefit.

"Well, I don't buy this," Deonna said incredulously, getting up off the couch and stretching her legs.

"What exactly the hell do you not *buy*," Tara asked, her pulse ticking.

"The props, the chanting, the blood – I'm not even convinced that it was *real* blood!"

"Wanna *taste* it?"

Tanya, who had been consoling Elaine on the couch – poor fragile Elaine, hyperventilating – piped in: "It's just that...how do we know if you're a real witch or not, y'know? I mean, you have to wonder. Y'know?"

The witch looked directly in the blond's face, felt her features melt like fondue, could almost see her cheeks move –

"Oh sweet, that's me," Tanya squealed at the sight of her own face.

Not an uncommon reaction – in those days, in that city. Soon, all three women, even the Fair Elaine, were touching & poking at Tara's face in fascination, pulling at her newly-flaxen locks.

"Is that real?"

"Shit. Shit!!!"

"It's...it's like looking into a motherfucking mirror," Tanya said in awe,

stroking Tara's/her strong jawline. "I'll give you \$50 if you kiss me...you know, with my face."

Again, not an uncommon reaction. And not uncommon for the witch to accept.

*** **

So a few days later, Tara's kicking back some Bartles and Jaymes in some bar and this chick about seven foot in a black motorcycle jacket comes up to her table. The woman had the appearance and bearing of a female wrestler or bodybuilder, but with none of the masculine, steroidal aftertaste. Her voluminous, jet-black hair terminated in severe bangs right above her weirdly translucent, pine-green eyes, and went down to her ass in the back. And upon her high, Nordic cheekbones rested the aftermath of a rather nasty, snot-hued acne attack.

The amazon flashed Tara a tight smile.

"Are you Tara Amadeo?"

The witch looked up from her half-eaten 'tato-skins and several empty bottles of Bartles and Jaymes and greeted the large woman with a sleepy grin and the voice of a used car salesman.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

Next thing Tara knew, she was smacked upside the head with the ass-end of a powerful meaty hand. Blood shot out of her left ear. Then the witch was lifted up, thrown over the titaness' shoulder, and lost consciousness somewhere before they exited the bar.

Last thing the witch remembered was the woman's comment to a stunned passerby:

"Jus' a lover's quarrel, nothing to worry over."

*** **

When you wake up strung by your heels in the middle of a vampire's den,

a chick lapping away at a fresh wound on your neck, well, it makes you take stock of your life. As you hang upside-down with your hands bound behind you and what is most probably a binding spell scotch-taped to your forehead, it does beg the question, “what have I been doing exactly, all these many years, to lead to this particular moment?”

The amazon – who Tara had surmised, a little too late, was both “Marta” of the red bandana and some sort of uber-vampire-queen – sat back in a folding-chair that groaned under her size and looked at the witch with a mixture of pity and the disdain usually reserved for animals that just shit the floor.

“What made you think that you could go around hexing people like that and not eventually end up disemboweled?”

“That’s a fair question,” Tara deadpanned, trying to shoo away with her ear the dark-haired vampire at her jugular.

“It’ll probably be the last question you ever fucking answer.”

*** **

Vampire décor – now, *there’s* a subject. Throughout the witch’s life she would be in several vampiric lairs, dear Marta’s being the inaugural. Some vampires try to jazz up the place as if they were still alive and shit, and some, like Marta, just regard their shelter as a “clubhouse” for eating and hibernating; whatever the case, there’s always a thin pallor of death and mildew that covers the surroundings like a fine layer of white dust. Her “unlivingroom” consisted of several chairs of all different styles, a dingy yellow-and-orange floral couch with no cushions, a bare queen-sized mattress on the floor covered with a pink blanket, a wicker-and-bamboo shelf that was overflowing with razors, syringes, and some unidentifiable black shit, and various homey knickknacks and wall-hangings with a Seventies “arts and crafts” flair strewn about – which, all-in-all, gave Tara the impression of a Satanic version of the set from *Three’s Company*, all shaded in the murky grays and blacks that the one bare bulb sticking out of a chipped ceramic lamp of in the shape of a Flamenco dancer would allow.

And while the witch couldn't see directly below her, the stench of ancient meat and accumulated, aged blood that permeated her nostrils gave her the distinct impression that this was a "bleeding" spot of some kind; she supposed she should have felt a little lucky she wasn't hanging there from a meat hook through her tit.

"*That's* dinner?" incredulously asked the short, slightly chubby girl standing next to Marta.

The little bit's hair was fire-engine red and cut in an angry Woody Woodpecker mohawk, rows of tin in the shape of skulls, roses, and rings on display without obscuration through the cartilage & lobes of both ears. The young woman's ample chest stretched the head of the sleeveless Debbie Gibson "Electric Youth Tour" T-shirt she wore, and her chunky butt & thighs, clad in black & white checkerboard tights, dwindled into slim calves sheathed in high, burnished-black shit-kicker boots.

Marta regarded the little vampire, who was probably her *childe*, with simultaneous affection & imperiousness.

"Not much, I know, dear Rache _ but the veal was an enemy of your Mistress and the Clan, and as such I hope you and your sisters will find her taste sweet –"

The vampire called Rache's face flushed crimson and her round face sharply creased into a grimace.

"*Sisters*," she spit out in disgust.

"Now, now," Marta clucked pedantically, "remember what I said about getting along with the other *childer*. I'll tolerate no more hostility towards your sisters – after all, they express no such animus towards you."

"That's because they're *stupid*," Rache muttered under her breath, eyeing daggers at the wraithlike statuesque blond woman drifting in and out of Tara's line of vision – the witch saw enough to know that this was Alison. *Fuck, so they had me curse a fucking vampire*, thought Tara. Great.

The witch felt completely screwed. She had to buy some time.

"So, um...how did you find out?" Tara asked in a conversational-under-

duress tone. “You know, about me?”

Marta leaned into her chair and touched her palms together.

“Simple...I *networked*.”

Fear snagged the witch’s intestines. She strained her eyes up and left as far as they would go, attempting to make out the face of the woman who was lapping at her throat-wound as if it was a snatch. Elaine.

Fuck!!!

It was the same woman, but her eyes were spiritless – more specifically, there was a spirit there, but it was alien to humankind. Lips that were once neatly delineated with paint & pencil were smeared-over with blood – *Tara’s* blood!

“Hey there, Elaine – how ya doin’? You still owe me the pay-on-results part of my fee, by the way.”

Elaine emitted a dumb, throaty laugh that made her look like an imbecile.

*** **

Marta got up from the chair and stretched out her arms maternally.

“Elaine, honey...Xuchera...c’mere...”

Elaine left Tara’s neck and the willowy Alison passed like a ghost in front of her vision again, the paths of both vampires terminating in the large woman’s embrace.

“You see how loving? I – unlike *you* – bring people together. I bring closure. You bring chaos. So Elaine was sad about Xuchera – that’s what we call her here, that’s the name she always wanted to be – well, all she had to do was come here, talk to me. I had no truck with Elaine. No need to resort to such...extreme measures. No need to be hurtful, hateful. I never hunt. They come to me. They come for love and closure. They come to you for chaos and revenge. You look at us like we’re the parasites – but all there is here is love. *You’re* the parasite. Your domain is that of the loveless.”

The witch regarded the two women at either side of the amazon, those girls with bloodstained faces and ashen skin, nuzzling against their Mistress with

mindless, voluptuous abandon like a pair of refugees from a Jean Rollin film. Behind them, angrily flexing her stubby fingers, was the little red one, Rache. Above, Tara could hear scratching on the ceiling, footprints, the faint howl of cats.

Bargaining time.

“So – isn’t there anything I could do for you? Don’t you have any enemies I could put the kibosh on? We could work together...”

Marta flicked her tongue and gave Elaine a long, quick lick right above her left eyebrow. That was one long motherfucking tongue.

“Funny thing – I really don’t *have* any enemies. Enemies never stick around long enough. And I really don’t have any need for your wretched parlor tricks, either; I have a nice contact in Chinatown that provides that service – *binding spells* are his specialty. Even my skin is healing quite nicely –THANKS for asking – the dripping has stopped and the sores are drying up. Nope, right now my concern is for my girls...the family is growing now, and supply...demand...you know. It’s a bitch. Girls? Oh *girls*...”

At Marta’s call Elaine’s two roommates glided down the stairs, looking like the consumptive brides of Dracula, their faces relaxed in masks of desire without mind.

It seemed like Tara was pretty much fucked. I mean, there are some times when you just have to admit this to yourself, where not all the Deepak Chopra-ing and bubbles of light and positive thinking in the world can explain away the steaming pile of bullshit you’ve found yourself immersed in. And the witch admitted to herself that she kind of deserved it. Well, not to be eaten alive by vampires, she didn’t deserve that. Maybe to have her ass kicked in a little, maybe a head-dunk in the toilet of the ladies’ lavatory. But no, not eaten alive. No, Tara decided, she didn’t deserve that.

“I must warn you,” Tara warned, “my blood is not that of ordinary mortals. There are some necromantic elements in the plasma that can cause severe stomach cramping and possible nipple-leprosy.”

Marta wasn’t buying it. She pushed her *childer* away and motioned

towards the witch's poor lil' hard-luck carcass.

"Girls – FEED! But take care that you do not bite it – a witch who is a vampire would be much too powerful. Simply drain and slurp."

Aw, fuck.

*** **

Tara felt that there was something almost erotic about a bunch of whacked-out vampire women tearing a person's flesh open with nails (both the metal & organic kind) and knives and then hovering over the free-flowing wounds like hummingbirds and tenderly yapping up the *sang* – or was she especially perverted? She might have been. At any rate, it was the whole "me-and-my-impending-death" scenario that was truly bothering the witch – that bummed her the fuck out.

Every few minutes she felt a new slash, a new pain, a new river of heat. Her clothes were soaked in blood, and it seemed like all of the red-black fluid converged upon her head, which was clotted with the stuff. It was in her fucking eyes.

And always the confluence of vibrating lips, the slink and slime of tongues against cuts that can no longer deliver--bracing themselves against the witch's body in the hope that the new angle, the deeper thrust, might yield a little more –

And then more cuts.

"Oh, *Goddamitt!!*"

All the while, Marta stood back or sat, watching and sometimes not even watching, not even caring about the display. She wasn't partaking in the eating of Tara – maybe she feared her boast about the nipple-leprosy. Or maybe she was indeed so disgusted with her – truly thought the witch so low – that she wouldn't deign suck from her bastard wounds. Or maybe she would get the captive's blood secondhand from her posse of bitches. Or maybe Marta always got firsties everywhere else, and she was simply *full*.

Whatever the case, Tara was starting to get a bit lightheaded, so much so

that she didn't even realize when they stopped feeding.

Eyes squeezed shut from the blood, ears filled with the crunch of her own blood clotting. *Her* body.

*** **

The witch felt a finger poke at her cheek.

"*Hey*," said Rache. The vampire's breath on Tara's face bringing back to her the scent of her own stale blood.

"Knock-knock who's there," she replied weakly.

"Did you really mean that? About helping out? Can you do things? For *me*?"

Tara slowly pried her eyes open. There was the little red one, on her haunches, a thick, irregular "O" of crimson around her mouth.

"What'll it be? A heart, courage, a trip back to Kansas?"

"Nah, I just want power & revenge."

Finally, somebody the witch could talk with.

*** **

"And then Xuchera came on the scene and suddenly, I'm not so cool anymore. And then all these other bony 'hos. *I can't fucking stand it!* Know what I mean?"

"That's ingratitude for you," Tara said, smelling stale blood mixed with undead flesh and trying not to vomit.

"I just want a little more respect – you know? I want to be on top! Why not? I'm ready! I'm just as smart as Marta, and smarter than those other skanks and probably about 80 percent of the other vamps out there. Can't you give this to me? Through *magic*? I mean, you know they're going to *kill* you, right?"

"And you're not going to kill me?"

"Well...yeah," she said with a good-natured grin that for some reason

brought to mind Strawberry Shortcake, “I’m gonna *kill* you, too.”

*** **

“I can place a charm on your luck...petition the Gods. You know, ask to expand your powers, give you an extra dose of charisma. Piece of cake. But I’m going to need some ingredients. And you’ve got to take this piece of paper off my head. And – I have to get out of here with most gallons of my blood intact.”

“Yes? Really? But how do I know you won’t bail after I remove the binding?”

“I *promise* I won’t.”

“No, seriously,” she said, idly tracing a ridge of blood on the witch’s chin that had not quite healed yet and then licking it off her finger.

“Okay, half-a-binding. Remove half of the paper. And if there’s a problem...rip my throat out or something.”

“So it’s kind of like a win-win situation for me,” she commented without irony.

“Exactly. That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

*** **

Tara didn’t like practicing magic with a gun to her head, or an elongated canine poised against her carotid artery. She wasn’t sure if the damned crazy thing was going to work. She dictated to Rache a laundry-list of bullshit items – sugar, herbs, pubic hair, secretions. The usual. But the witch had never invoked the Gods to give another power before. Power was supposed to be all for herself – bloody good it all did her.

The other vamps were resting upstairs with a major haemo-hangover; apparently gorging on blood made the undead a bit drowsy. And of course Marta fed on them all and passed out in a lump. *So from my veins to her gullet, eh?*, thought Tara grimly.

And the little red fire-engine – Rache – she avoided the whole thing. Limited her blood intake. Watched as her unwanted sisters-in-blood settled into their dreamless sleep. Made a quick plan, right on the spot – saw the opportunity and grabbed it. The witch had greatly underestimated Rache, at their first encounter. She thought she wasn't very clever, wasn't very conscious, just another reanimated corpse with certain traits that approximated humanity – laughter, desire, jealousy. But Tara had underestimated her. She had judged her as pure minion material, but there was that angry megalomaniacal mini-Tony Montana quality about her that her magic could not have possibly implanted. So hats off to Rache, may she rot in hell.

*** **

The elements of the spell were in place. A pentagram was drawn below Tara, or more like scratched into the puddle of dried blood. Rache put all the ingredients upon a scrap torn from another of Marta's funky bandanas, this one white. The witch forwent the usual circle-shielding, as there was no way to even begin to purify such a damned evil environment; there was going to be bad shit clinging to this working no matter how many Hail Marys and Evocations of the Lesser Pentagram she performed. She did a perfunctory corner-calling and then went right into invoking the Gods and asking for favors. With her magickal ability working only at half-power nothing felt right – she wasn't even convinced that it was working at all, or working anywhere near enough. And perhaps Rache felt that, as well; it might have explained why at the vital moment when the witch offered up a sacrifice to the Gods the vampire stabbed her hard between the shoulder blades –

Tara's mouth flew open and let out a loud, throaty yelp of pain as the blood flowed down the back of her neck and through the tangle of her hair. This bitch was going to sacrifice her! *Holy shit and Begorrah!*

Another cut on the witch's arm – relatively shallow but from her shoulder to her elbow. She began screaming her head off, hoping to rouse Rache's

Mistress in the prayer that the two vamps might mix it up and kill each other.

“It’s too late,” Rache said with an even, inscrutable voice, scooping up the now-red cloth with the sugar, herbs, pubic hair, and secretions and tucking it carefully in her jeans pocket. “I’ve got the power now. I can feel it. Thanks. Bye.”

And with that, Tara’s all-too-brief partner in the joys of thaumaturgy poised the knife at her throat.

*** **

The Gods must be crazy, or at least a wee bit sadistic. Of all the times for the binding spell taped to the witch’s forehead to fall off – why couldn’t it be before Rache got the queen-bee mojo and spread misery & infection to over half the island of Manhattan and several gentrified slices of Brooklyn & Queens? Of course, Tara’s immediate concern – saving her own ass – was addressed, so thank-you Gods You lovable Gods You.

So as the buckets (oh all right, *liters*) of blood that had spilled down her neck finally managed to loosen the tape of the halved binding parchment on her forehead – sending the wet brown paper with the now-illegible Chinese writing dropping upon the pile of filth below – *boomboomboom* went Marta’s feet down the steps. Bitch faces bitch across a cozy macrame-decorated abattoir.

“*Rache*,” Marta said, her voice attempting to remain calm but sharply edged with ominous annoyance, “just what the hell is going on?”

“Oh, the veal just tried to escape, that’s all, so I had to stab her some,” Rache said matter-of-factly, pointing at the captive. *What a lying little tramp*, thought Tara; the vampire was supposed to fight her former mentor to the death & then the witch would slip out a back entrance! She tried to set the record straight.

“Don’t listen to her – she’s out for power & bloody revenge!”

Marta put her hands on her hips and talked to Rache as if she was a naughty grade-school student.

“Rache, is this true?”

“No, she’s just trying to create friction between us in the hopes that we’ll slaughter each other. She’s *evil*.”

“Tara, is this true?”

“She said you had a fat ass – ow!”

Rache poked Tara in the shoulder with the knife, then went up to Marta and plunked her head upon her breast submissively. Tara found it rather touching, in a “I want to burn this whole motherfucking place to the ground” sort of way.

“I know I’ve been a little pain-in-the-ass lately, Marta...what with the new girls and all...but I recognize your right as Mistress to take new *childer*...and all I want to do now...is work with you and Xuchera and Elaine and the others to make this the bestest vampire den it can possibly be...I *love* you, Marta...”

Tara turned her head so far around that it almost snapped off— she had to witness this monstrous display for herself. Was that seven-foot bad-ass bloody mama actually buying this shit? Well, indeed she was, chucking her child affectionately under her chin with her massive hand, the same one that almost knocked the witch’s Eustachian tube out of her head. *Is my whole gender prone to this soft-hearted shit?!*, Tara silently fumed. Was not even the butchiest of the butch immune to the mewls of some gimlet-eyed, freckle-faced, Little Orphan Annie from Hades? Dammit! This wasn’t supposed to happen! *Chaos!* There was supposed to be chaos! That’s what the witch did best! Chaos!

And then suddenly she could feel it – the magick –It bubbled up from her guts, shot through her solar plexus, slithered up her femur bones and rose taut into the ceiling-rope – *spin, tricky woman, spin, spin, spin* –

Tara was spinning from her bound ankles-first so imperceptibly that the canoodling vampires didn’t notice, spinning in a tiny circle, spinning, creaking rope, but then wider, spinning, and soon a breeze hit them, and before they knew it the witch’s spinning, steadily rotating body hit them full in the face – *smack!*

*** **

Now, Tara could get a little silly when the magick hit her brain--she (snap!) fell to the floor & rolled to her feet in one smooth, somewhat impossible Wonkaesque motion, laughing hysterically at the downed and confused Marta and Rache, her hands still bound and blood plastering the top half of her body, rivulets of red traveling up her face and striping her cheeks and forehead, reverse-splatter.

"*Jesus H. Christ on a motorbike*," Marta said slowly under her breath, pulling herself off the floor and eying warily the insanely giggling bloody apparition before her.

Tara stared them down, got a little cagey, then did a little dance. Red charged her first, but the witch's reflexes were supernaturally sharp under the madness of the magick, and she gracefully sidestepped the vampire and chortled as she dove headfirst into the bamboo shelf. The clatter of metal instruments falling everywhere, splinters of bamboo in her ass.

"Let me get her, Rache," Marta said confidently, her arms flexed & bent in pre-bash mode; Tara's back was to the vampire but she knew, knew exactly what the amazon was doing, what she was planning to do, she knew...

"I've killed witches before!," Marta spit out right before she charged the witch.

"Oh you *did*, did you," Tara replied with a toothy, manic grin. "But have you given Kali a fuzzy navel?"

A thorny, bony arm exploded out from the wound between the witch's shoulder blades and caught the pouncing amazon right in the giblets, hoisting the shocked amazon in the air and willing the demonic, newly-born limb to *grab grab grab* and pull those sausages right out of her belly. And Tara laughed, and laughed, and laughed, never stopping to come up with a witty repartee, just (snap!) letting the arm wither and drop off her body – arm, intestines, Marta, go boom!

"Hurrrr...", Marta groaned through her teeth, scooping her bowels up and tucking them into her pants like a shirt so she wouldn't trip on them. Just an annoyance, I'm sure, nothing some glue and duct-tape couldn't fix; vampires

don't shit, after all. The raven-haired amazon's head writhed upon her thick, muscular neck as she shouted in a rage to the house, black bile dripping out of her mouth:

"Rache! Xuchera! *Girls! Wake the fuck up! Kill her!* Get off your asses and kill her right now!"

Rache had a rusty pair of garden shears in her hands and was preparing to make a lunge for Tara's head; in response the witch's form glamourised into hers, the whole truncated thing, losing several inches in the process. Something inside of the vampire choked and stuttered as she saw her own body wearing Tara's tight bloodstained clothes; then her expression took on a new resolve and she landed those closed shears into the witch's chest, spearing her heart.

This would be a good time as any to delineate the extent of Tara Amadeo's powers and abilities just in case you would like to RPG her one boring Friday night. There were no delineations to her powers. Magickally, she was just an amorphous blob of chaos. That was the alpha and omega of it. Downside, she had no real control of it; if she did, she would have been some sort of necromantic Martha Stewart, and probably very rich. But as things stood, she was an idiot. With a pair of garden shears severing her aorta.

Perhaps on a different day, under a different phase of the moon, influenced by a different turn of her menstrual wheel and a dozen other factors, that shot to her heart with the decrepit gardening implement would have killed Tara; but as things stood, she simply weakened and fell on her ass, from which position Rache and the other vampire-brides that were quickly gliding down the stairs could tear her tendon-from-tendon.

Soon the witch was swimming in sea of pale ashy limbs and tits, intoxicated by the aroma of mercury-accented death breath. Even for a chaos-magician riding on a particularly well-starred wave of destruction, the loss of blood & the Spear of Tetanus that was lodged in her heart made it somewhat difficult to beat back the throng of vampire bitches. She considered giving in – far worse ways to die than to have her spinal-cord be the toothpick at the end of an infernal orgy of blood. And the women, frankly, were not that unattractive. But

she had auctions on eBay, dammit!

Tara pulled a Margaret Hamilton.

“S-she’s melted,” Elaine gasped as Rache slammed her fists into her empty shirt.

*** **

So the witch materialized in the attic completely naked and in the midst of about 50 hungry, drawling cats and ankle-deep in poop. *Ah, so this was the vampires’ nefarious scheme, eh?*, thought Tara in affected outrage. Keep a stock of cats on the side in case they need a quick meal! She took pity on the poor little things, with their cute runny eyes and tick-infested ears and plaintive wails. One of the felines, a white shorthair with no teeth, a sunken chin, and an expression that looked not unlike Liza Minnelli on a bender, meekly walked up to her; Tara crouched down and extended her hand to the sweet, pathetic creature. The cat hesitantly approached the bloody hand and sniffed it, then licked a finger with her warm pink tongue. Deciding to itself that this was good, the cat turned its head back to the others, nodded, and soon they were all attacking the witch’s nude body in a clawing, screeching rage.

Tara struggled to get to the window, several cats hanging onto her body as if attached with velcro, and managed to defenestrate herself. She took some satisfaction in the knowledge that she killed two of the animals in the process, but it took some work scraping them off her back.

*** **

Luckily (and with much thanks to the Yoruban God Eshu, He Who Breaks Your Leg & Sells You The Cast), as Tara Amadeo lie blooded, stabbed, speared, scratched, bit, and bruised amongst the detritus of the vampire den’s backyard, a hunky older vampire-slayer type was passing through. She immediately punched him in the nuts, stole his clothes, and boarded the public bus back home.

*** **

I suppose there is a lesson in here, somewhere.

CHAPTER TWO: THE TROUBLE WITH BLONDS

There is a certain magical time in the City when it's so late at night that the revelers are packed up and gone from the streets, and the sidewalks, bathed in the glow of neon signs and street lights, are conspicuously untrod and still. Even the black streets are blank and empty, and the windows in the buildings dark or drawn with shades or blinds. The City without its people becomes sinister and unhealthy and steeped in melancholy, and the vampires that venture out at such an opportune time are only seen if they want you to – and if they want you to, chances are you'll be dead soon.

But the smattering of vamps that travelled the streets soft and motionless like shadows, they recognized the tall figure dressed in a pea-green jacket with the body of a soldier – the one that had the audacity to walk the cobblestones of Lafayette so boldly, so boldly for a human. He fit the description of the vampire hunter that had been silently decimating the bloodsucker community around these parts and other sections of the City: tow-colored ponytail streaked with a hint of white, reddened skin, craggy face, and the iciest of blue eyes. Perhaps a few forward-thinking vampires might have gotten together and decided to wax this bastard, but so many of the creatures – so newly-formed and overly-trusting in the concept of their immortality – thought the hunter was some sort of urban legend. However, watching him stride so confidently under their noses, (despite a slight limp) – they couldn't be bothered to take any chances, couldn't be bothered, couldn't be the one to inconvenience him- or herself, leave him to the next vampire.

The man reached the corner of Broome where, nestled between a Chinese condiments wholesaler and an abandoned tap dancing studio, stood Lord of Illusion – the magic and magick pseudo-store/living quarters owned by a

one Malcolm Dust. The metal window-gate was drawn down and locked into place, but there was a faint light glowing from the partially submerged barred basement window. The man's big, veiny hand pounded ominously on the window-gate, making the slight, thirty-something man in his underwear who was sitting in the basement before his altar jump. For a second, Malcolm had thought the Dark One was finally answering him.

Thoomthoomthoom –

“Son of a bitch...” Malcolm muttered, raking his fingers through his thinning dirty-blond hair and casting a jaundiced eye at the feet that darkened the frosted glass of his window. “We’re closed,” he yelled at the window, his voice cracking in anger, “Get lost!” The bricks that made of the walls of his sanctum sanctorum were painted red and the decor was a mix between the witchy, the Eastern, and the just plain Satanic. On the wall directly behind his altar was a red-and-black tapestry reproducing Eliphas Levi's famous illustration of Baphomet, and on the wall opposite was a large framed poster for the movie *The Black Cat*. Piled on industrial metal shelving were ritual supplies – athames, powders in jars, and bells – and stacks and stacks of books on the Craft, many old and crumbling and kept in sealed plastic bags. The altar itself consisted of two black pillar candles impaled on gothic metal sconces before a coral-colored sushi tray heaped with incense and various magickal charms and trifles. It was all in sharp contrast to the jaunty assortment of old-time magic and escape-artist memorabilia, the ancient wind-up animals with their musical instruments, and quaint turn-of-the-century sideshow posters and photographs of defunct amusement parks he had upstairs. In the old days, in the mid-80's, he would display his infernal predilections and hobbies out in the open, boldly pasting upside-down pentagram and Baphomet decals on the glass door and maintaining a candlelit altar to a four-foot plaster stature of the Devil in a zoot suit by the cash register.

But there was a slow and steady transformation in Malcolm over the intervening years, worn away mineral by mineral, smooth and undetected like the cumulative effect of rainwater. He kept asking Lucifer, kept making entreaties to the goetic demons for something – but he never quite got it. And he never quite

got it, he reasoned, because he never quite defined it. He always assumed it was power that was the goal, magickal power. And maybe it was. But though he did become quite proficient in the mystic arts over the years, he never quite achieved that something that would have fed him. He always felt a degree of anger, of Sisyphean misery – and always the sneering disgust at the banality and waste around him, the gentrification of his neighborhood and the well-heeled automatons populating it who did nothing anymore but shopshopshop down one chain store drag or another. He had looked to magick to show him a more textured, exciting, meaningful world – and now both the world of the occult and the world outside his window seemed to settle into a holding-pattern, a stagnation, interrupted occasionally by a neat ectoplasmic manifestation during a ritual or visits from that maniac chick Amadeo.

Perhaps one day even the tapestry of Baphomet would be gone, and Malcolm would just be another fucking vendor in lower Manhattan selling trifles to tourists. At any rate, magick didn't seem to keep the loons and Jehovah's Witnesses from knocking on his door, though to be honest he kind of enjoyed fucking with the Witnesses.

Thoomthoomthoom–

“Fucking–God!!!”

He grabbed his pants that were draped across a chair, pulled his suspenders over his bare shoulders, and stomped up the steps in a pair of rather conservative-looking slippers, on the way stopping to grab an athame off a shelf and sticking it in his belt loop.

Thoomthoomthoom–

Once upstairs he felt his way in the dark to the door, unlocked it, walked through the tiny vestibule up to the gray gate, kicking away an accumulation of takeout menus and yoga fliers accompanied by a curse against the Chinese and hippies. He squinted through a 3" x 5" hole in the gate and found himself face-to-face with a rather strong chin.

“What?” Malcolm shot out. “It's three fucking o'clock in the fucking morning!”

A pair of stark, ice-blue eyes suddenly filled the slot, staring back at Malcolm with intensity bordering on mania.

“For the love of God, let me in! The *vampires* are coming!”

Malcolm cocked his head. Obviously a whack-job.

“Are you on crack?! Get the fuck out of here, you freak!”

The tall man pounded again on the gate in response, the noise reverberating through the whole abandoned street.

Thoomthoomthoom—

“The vampires! They’re coming this way – *right now*! It’s imperative that you believe me because...because in 30 minutes or so, this whole place is going to get *overrun*! I have to get inside or I’ll get splattered all over this gate!”

“*Dude*,” Malcolm said, keeping his hand on the handle of his athame and trying soften his expression so the would look somewhat sympathetic and reasonable and hoping the fruitbat would just leave so he could go back to invoking Lucifer. “You need to find a nice quiet place – y’know, a subway station or something, not my place – and just sleep this off, man –“

The ice-blue eyes accented with wrinkles that were framed in the slot in the gate looked away for a second in thought, then returned to stare at Malcolm in blazing, capillary-bursting alarm.

“*You fool*! Don’t you realize that only several blocks away from here there are people dead in the streets, their throats hacked to pieces and their chests gutted? Babies dead in their mother’s arms in cars, bodies hanging out of windows and sprawled on stairways?! There’s a whole *mob* of these undead bastards, and the police can’t handle it, and we’ve even got some cops bitten and turning into these motherfuckers! It makes Dawn of the Dead look like a fucking Sunday picnic, *do you understand what I’m telling you?!*” The man made Malcolm flinch as he pounded again on the gate—*thoomthoomthoom*—and began again, “They’re working their way down 2nd right now! And they’re very fucking *fast* – do you understand what I’m telling you?! For Christ’s sake, didn’t you hear all the *sirens* go by?”

Malcolm tried to stay in the comfortable zone of mind in which most

people he suspected of being whack-jobs were quite obviously and without discussion whack-jobs and not worth another thought – a necessary point of view to maintain when trafficking in the occult and travelling amongst its practitioners – but the mention of the sirens set off waves of fear deep in his stomach that took him aback in its forcefulness. His chest started to sweat – yes, the sirens, he did hear an unusual amount of them that night. He had assumed they were just for some poor bastard somewhere –

“Well, what do you expect *me* to do about it?!”

“You have to let me in before they get here...they’re on to me...I’m...I’m part of the underground resistance network...and I need your phone and any supplies or weapons you might have...together we could –“

The first thought that occurred to Malcolm, once the mention of the sirens occurred and the whack-job theory weakened, was that this was the result of some sort of black magick gone bad and blacker. Perhaps it was some sort of ritual or evocation that brought this infestation out of some chthonious portal – vampires he didn’t believe in, but demons most certainly. He believed in demons, because he worked with them, prayed to them, and consequently he also believed in the concept of possession – would it not be feasible that some dark force could impregnate some poor bastard’s mind and drive him to do the unthinkable? Would it not be possible that magick could create such a condition –indeed, were there not spells and rituals in some of the old, hide-bound grimoires that he had seen or copied or stole that specifically mentioned such a state, and gave the specific instructions on how to achieve it? Perspiration bunched up on his forehead and spilled down his pale blue eyes as he contemplated the icy, almost luminescent ones that were focused back at him.

Thoomthoomthoom–

Malcolm’s pragmatism broke in, figuring that this man was some sort of instigator or demon-target--that it even could have been the man himself who brought the flesh-eaters down this way. To invite such a person into his house took the chance that the steadily-approaching creatures – and it was true, demons moved fast – would get in somehow as he set out to relock the gates

and the door. Or maybe the man himself was somehow unstable, or infected, or–

Thoomthoomthoom–

“Let me in! *Please!*”

A dozen different protection spells ran through Malcolm’s mind, some banishing rituals, even a bit of teleportation if need be (though it would take some effort).

“I’m...*sorry*. I’m really sorry.”

And with that, Malcolm turned away from the slot, fully aware that it was a shitty thing to do, but that he didn’t believe in the Christian concept of morality, just practicality and the logic of one person’s guaranteed survival being more important than two dead maybe.

“*For the love of Godddd!!!*” *Thoomthoomthoom*. “They’re...they’re coming this way...they’re...they’ve got me! *Agh!* They’re tearing my heart out! *Agh! Agh!*” Then, a woman’s voice: “Ah, Malcolm ya cowardly little bastard! Come back here and let me in right now!”

Malcolm, immediately recognizing the female’s voice, smacked his hand painfully into his forehead and exclaimed, “*Cunt!*”

*** **

The slight dirty-blond man pulled up the gate with an ear-splitting roar and stared daggers at the brunette in the baggy clothes of the man that only moments before was standing in front of Lord Of Illusion. She was holding up the pants with one hand in the front, leaving it hanging dangerously close to her crack in the back and apparently not caring about that nor the prank nor the fact that she was bothering him in three o’clock in the fucking morning, just impudently striding (with the exception of a slight limp) into his store as if she owned it. *Bitch!* Had he only thrown her out of the place almost five years previous, when she was still manageable and ignorable, rather than beginning a reluctant course of magickal study that would render her able to pull shit like a glamour of this magnitude, and worse.

“What—“ he demanded, almost hopping in place in anger, “the fuck—is wrong with you?! *Huh?!?*” He didn’t really expect a decent answer, but it had to be asked nonetheless and right at the start.

Tara stumbled slightly against a display of card tricks and decks as if she was drunk, then turned and smiled like the devil at Malcolm. Suddenly her face and hair and hands were covered in brown dried blood, almost like paint, and soaked-in stains appeared on the pants and even through the thick coat as if it was the reappearance of disappearing ink.

Malcolm stared at the woman in horror, pulling the athame out of his belt loop and throwing it onto the counter.

“Christ!” he exclaimed.

Tara shook her head and plunked herself in an easy chair upholstered in a billiard-ball pattern.

“Not quite,” she answered.

“Don’t sit THERE!” he yelped in helplessness, as the powdery burnt red and black on her skin and the vampire-hunter’s clothes smeared on the colorful textile. “You’re getting blood—“

“Jeez-Louise! Is everybody in this fucking city so fucking concerned about a little bodily fluids on their furniture? What a borough of uptights! Go get one of those protein-cleaners or something and stop being such a puss! Sure, you’ll let an innocent Hero of the People die at the hands of a pack of rampaging vamps at your doorstep, but—“

“That wasn’t even fucking *real*, you—“

“Yeah, well, if it WAS real you’d do the same damn thing! Because you’re a big *puss* just out for yourself!”

Malcolm kicked at a table and stuck his finger at her in a fury.

“Fuck you, you ungrateful fucking skank! Who the FUCK are you to lecture to me?! You’re the very LAST person to lecture to me!”

He caught his breath and sat on the floor, wiping sweat off his neck and chin with the back of his hand. In the harshness of the overhead lights he took a bit closer note of her apparent injuries and nodded to them in sheepish concern.

“So, um...you need to go to a hospital, or anything?”

“Nah,” she answered, pulling back one of the sleeves of the coat and casting an emotionless glance at the scratch- and cut-filled arm, slashes of black in a sea of brown. “You can’t explain this sort of stuff to a doctor, they get all questioney and up in your business and stuff. Besides, my magick got pretty flared up, pretty full-blown and it’s healing it fast. No problem. You should have seen me before.”

“So how did you end up like this? Business or pleasure?”

“Business. In a roundabout sort of way. Which is what usually happens.”

“Don’t mind me saying so, but maybe you ought to be a bit more choosy in your clientele.”

“Choosiness got nothing to do with it. Magick has everything to do with it. I could do business with somebody perfect like the goddamn Pope and still end up blowing up the whole world.”

“Well,” Malcolm said, pulling himself to his feet and beginning to feel the weight of half a night gone by with no sleep, “let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that, shall we?”

Silence. The man could never look at Tara without remembering his own young, ass-headed self. In ‘87 he was just a slip of a lad, only a few years into his twenties and a freshly minted fast-tracked BA in BS that he had no intention of using anyhow. There was no place in the University nor the “real world” in which a mage could fit in or flourish – though he would argue that what one considered the “real world” might be an illusion as well. But what was the use of arguing? Everybody wanted everything in black and white. So he convinced his parents to give him the money they were saving for his inheritance so he could open up the shop in downtown Manhattan. Though Malcolm at that age subscribed to belief that he who testifies to knowing the answers is a fool – because the Truth is unknowable and multi-layered/multi-roomed like a Chinese puzzle – he did feel rather strongly that to not live his life authentically was the only real sin in a world populated by fairy-tale gods. So he made his interest in magick his occupation and dyed his hair red like Johnny Rotten and had no truck

against wearing an Anton LaVey t-shirt or a tiny silver swastika hanging like a pixy from his left ear (after all, as any educated person would know, it was really a peace sign extolled by Blavatsky's Seven Mahatmas). He considered himself an urban shaman, though he had no real inclination to actually shamanize anyone outside his window – he never really met anybody who truly deserved it. So few believed in the Craft anyway, and the ones who did were either pathetic and profane creatures seeking to reclaim lost lovers or other self-proclaimed wizards and witches like himself.

Tara was...different. Tara was different.

Tara sucked up what he had to teach her – all of it, quickly and without him even realizing the extent or the seriousness--and eclipsed him. Made the Craft a mockery. Made the glamour a whoring tool. Made the invocation of the goetic demons a party line. And in the end had the temerity to blame him for it, blame him for corrupting her, rebutting his criticisms with that familiar question, “wasn't this exactly what you wanted?” No Tara, he thought now and thought on so many separate occasions that it felt like a bad joke, you were never my Frankenstein. I disown you. I have nothing to do with it. I'm just another poor bastard creation of this godless planet, just like you. And I am the sole writer of this life, and personal perception is King – and if you don't think so, if you don't think the document of our senses is all there is, put out your eyes and try to see. It's all just a masturbation trip, this life, we're all soloists accidentally finding ourselves in somebody else's narrative and immediately setting out to edit it and leave our own fucking stamp.

Tara rubbed some blood off her chin thoughtfully.

“D'you have a cigarette?”

“I don't smoke anymore.”

“You're a Satanist *and* a non-smoker?”

“I'm a *Luciferian*, as you're already well aware of. And I like to cut down on as many temptations to fate as possible.”

“Don't you get nic cravings?”

Malcolm stood directly in front of her and folded his arms in front of his

chest--he grew weary of this idle chatter, and besides having a woman covered in blood in the middle of his store was probably the least of things he wanted to do. He had enough problems with the Catholic League and a couple of fucking fascist cops with nightsticks up their ass.

"Don't you have another abattoir to skinny-dip in?"

"You hate me, don't you?"

"Hate is a wasted emotion. I only believe in actions that produce results."

"No, I do believe you really hate me." She folded her arms and suddenly glamourised into his form, Malcolm wincing at the sight of his own face covered in gore. "I never really understood why."

"Don't you fucking use my face in here with that T-1000 bullshit," he spit out between partially clenched teeth. Tara pulled herself luxuriously out of the chair like a cat with a slight balance problem and strode up to him, flashing him a tight, snotty smile with his own face.

"You think you know better than me, don't ya? That you're just a big fucking *genius* who knows it all."

"I know enough to admit that I don't know," he said in slow, measured words, trying to control the temper that was already making the tips of his fingers and the soles of his feet sizzle.

"Oh, that's just some Buddhist Socrates crap that you read off the bottom of your Ovaltine mug. You think you know – you think you know exactly what's going on here, don't you?"

"And what – Tara, dear, *love* – is exactly going on here? Besides you barging in here under the pretense of bloody murder and acting like an asshole?"

"I don't know – why don't you ask *yourself*?"

Malcolm impulsively grabbed Tara by the bloodstained collar of the coat she was wearing and yanked it and her towards him. He wondered what it would be like to start pounding in his own face, and if doing so wouldn't quite qualify as "hitting a girl." Outside the store sirens cut through the night, accompanied by the screech of tires. Tara, as Malcolm, tilted her head and grinned, the rate of her breathing elevated as Malcolm's knuckles ground into her neck.

“Ooh, sounds like the *vampires* are back on the streets! Better bring the Hunter back so he can make America safe again!” And with that she morphed into her initial glamour, that of the tall, strapping, craggy-eyed man with the blond ponytail and the ice-blue eyes; Malcolm was abruptly forced to let go of the coat as the figure shot up in height and muscle; he backed away from Tara in disgust, sweat beading on his chest and dripping down the soft swell of his belly.

“Well go at it, John Wayne,” he said acidly as he waved with one hand and pointed the way to the door with the other. “Bye now! Say hello to Dracula and Lestat for me!”

The Hunter/Tara’s face suddenly became serious.

“The joke’s on you, Mal – vampires really *do* exist.”

“Vampires are just a metaphor,” Malcolm replied dismissively.

“Yeah right, a metaphor. Once you get in that state of mind, Mal, everything’s just a symbol or a cover-up – and at that point, you’ll find you got no floor. So be careful – Amigo Dust – and choose your realities wisely. And I’m telling you: vampires are real because not more than several hours ago I had one impale me through the chest with gardening equipment.”

Malcolm thrust his hands in his pockets and rocked jauntily on his slippered feet.

“Then why are you wasting your time with me? You should be out celebrating your *miraculous recovery*. And I – I’ll be *sleeping*. What with the walking dead mutilating the innocent and that ruddy turn of the moon the other day, I might just sit this little game out for some time and just sleep my ass off. And now if you would excuse me –“

“Sweet dreams, Malcolm,” said Tara through the rough voice of the Hunter.

*** **

Yep, Tara thought as headed up the avenues and turned back to her original blood-caked body. *Should have asked to use his shower*. She

concentrated and glamoured away the blood so she looked clean – not only could she alter the appearance of her body, but remnants of it like the blood as well. But the bitter smell of mercury was still there. Oh, who will notice in this urine-stained city? The excitement of living in New York City had worn away a long, long time ago for the witch. It was a place best left to tourists, the wealthy, and pencil-pushers commuting in from Long Island or New Jersey who could kick back a few beers and procure a good whore or lap dance before going home. But to the self-employed, the bored, the shiftless, or the merely thoughtful – there was nothing very special about that sooty strip of land, not when you looked directly at it. It was merely a playground for dilettantes and a humiliating dirty collection of cubbyholes for the poor. Way in the beginning – and she was sure she actually remembered this, that it wasn't some sort of alcohol-induced hallucination or the first stirrings of senility – there was some sort of *soul* to the place, as scruffy and edgy as that soul was. Activists. Artists. Magickians. It was the place of her and Molly Griep's dreams, of the two young women when they were in college and full of ambitions and idealisms that fairly begged the world to crush them. Take a couple of raw hearts and pure minds and stick them in this universe – the real one, not the ones of dreams and stardust and paw prints done in White-Out on your Jansport – and watch them suck up dirt and grime just like a filter in a handy-vac. Whenever Tara ambled aimless down the streets of Manhattan and witnessed the asymmetrical ugliness of the congested skyscape or the shoppers congregating like sugar-lusting ants around The Gap and H&M – whenever she regarded the City and felt disappointed – she thought of Molly Griep.

Molly was a member of what Tara referred to as the Burnt-Bridge Society – those key personages from the witch's past that not simply drifted out of her life but were burnt away permanently, leaving only the faint whiff of brimstone and a jumble of hazy, half-accurate memories in their wake. It was usually how it was done, in Tara's world, and it made her so conscientious of this fact that she greeted every new friendship and alliance with an eye to how it would end.

The witch walked under some scaffolding that was hiding a half-a-block of

stores, and as she did so, she could swear that she was passing the Dead. That the figure that walked in the opposite direction, that she could barely see out of the corner of her eye (but feel it brush against her elbow), that bald, white Shape – the dead? She was startled, a little spooked, but took no action and did not look back to be sure of what she thought she saw. Such sightings were old hat for her ever since the nonsense with Molly and the Great Invocation they did at Luna Park six years ago. Never had a ritual more fuck her up – and it sure as hell fucked Molly up as well, though looking back on it, Molly always was a bit fucked up. But looking back on it, Tara was also always a little fucked up, and not only fucked up but a bit gullible and stupid to boot – allowing Molly to drag her down the rabbit hole.

It began to drizzle, hard little flecks of water dotting the torn plastic sheeting that hung from the scaffolding. Across the street, in front of the Cohen's Fashion Optical – Tara saw another one. Another Dead. It wasn't a vampire. A vampire would have had some bizarre reassuring quality about it. A vampire would have been real, would have had some temporal anchoring.

Tara glamourised back into the Hunter again, finding a degree of comfort in the large male form, as if the Dead might be intimidated, or fooled into thinking she was not really herself. She tried to stare down that motherfucker Dead that was across the street as she got nearer to it, tried to get a bead on the form but to train one's entire concentration and vision upon such a creature diluted it, made it wave in the air like a wind-battered flag. The witch looked away and thrust her man's hands into the pockets of the pea-green coat, emerging from the scaffolding to be greeted by sharp splashes of rain.

No, she didn't like seeing the Dead. They seemed only to exist for her to partially see and wholeheartedly contemplate. Fuck them. Fuck the Dead. Yes, her and Molly made some mistakes. The Great Invocation should never have happened. Nothing between them was right after that. The morning after the Invocation, as they shakily boarded the bus back from Coney Island, their makeup running, Tara's bobbed brown hair and Molly's long blond Manic Panic streaked locks in tangles, their gothic outfits torn and filthy – taking a seat in the

back and holding on to each other and emitting weird half-sobs/half-giggles, holding on to each other's arms with tight, claw-like fingers, their faces scratched and raw, the sour aroma of vomit and piss emanating from their general direction. No, Tara as the Hunter thought, smiling bitterly to herself, ice-blue eyes narrowing into slits as the rain got harder and colder...*no, it wasn't a very dignified way for two mages who had just pulled off a grand ritual of cosmic proportions to be marching home in victory.* They had slept almost an entire day and night after they arrived back at the small rental they had only recently moved into. And nothing was right between them after that – things only got more insular, and their dreams and ambitions more ornate. Only weeks to graduation from Kennedy College, and their career plans consisted of publishing the rough-hewn vampire comic book that Molly had wrote and Tara illustrated...publishing the vampire comic, and then afterwards hanging out in Manhattan dressed as Goths and practicing magick and just being supported and moneyed somehow by virtue of the very fact that they were fabulous witches and goths and vampiroids, as if the culture branch of the government had a stipend for such people or that some sort of Andy Warhol might subsidize their work. Oh, and Molly finally fucking and keeping that cute dark-haired Goth boy that worked in the college library.

The hours they would blow on the weekends just lying on the floor atop black and red velvet pillows, their glossy heads touching each other as they listened to Garbage and were stoned on alcohol and tranquilizers, occult paraphernalia like athames, Ziploc bags of obscure herbs, skulls and lit black and purple candles strewn about the scratched parquet floor of the livingroom, plotting, plotting, plotting their next magickal working, plotting revenge on certain classmates, certain professors, magickal revenge, hexes, roots in jars, invocations to the Gods, plotting, plotting...and all the while, Goth was dying.

That last day before the big blow-up, Tara and Molly was doing just that – lying on the floor, staring at the patterns on the ceiling, incense burning, a big German poster for the movie *The Sweet Hereafter* staring down on them, the raven-haired, white-skinned sensual zombie with the mascara and the fuck-me

lips staring down at them as he was draped over a dead tree like the Scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz. Tara was wearing an oversized black Vampira T-Shirt and a purple crystal rosary whose pewter crucifix she like to suck on in bursts of nervous energy, and Molly was draped in a purple linen nightgown with an elaborate lacing on top that resembled a bustier. They had travelled together to a comic book convention in New Jersey a few days before, hoping to sell the vampire comic to some company and start their career as professional arbiters of all things witchy, gothic, and vampiric – but all they managed to do is get hit on by a bunch of horny comic book collectors and be told by one publisher that there was no market for their book as-is but that it might fly if they were willing to turn it into a porno. Apparently, lesbian vampire entertainment was always in season. As if to underline this point, the pair were accosted by a slightly older Asian woman in a severe page-boy and dressed like Vampirella that made a veiled pass at them, starting by expressing admiration for their own gothic stylings and then ending by giving Molly a mock bite/kiss on the neck as some male onlookers cheered. Such Sapphic overtures must have stirred the latent Catholic horror of such scenarios that lurked deep in the blond Wiccan's tightly-corseted chest, for she pulled away from the woman in disgust and announced abruptly to Tara that they were going home. In the parking lot, as they navigated their way through the cars and towards the bus stop, Molly obsessed on the Asian's violation of her neck, calling her "that fucking dyke" and that had they not been in such a public place she would have broke her kneecaps. The petite, very slightly chubby blonds' homophobic reverie was ended when Tara, after much thought, admitted that she was most probably bisexual and that Molly's tirade bugged her just a wee little bit. Not a word was said between the two for the entire ride back to Manhattan, nor the subway ride back to Brooklyn.

Tara that didn't see what was the big fucking deal with her admission of her sexuality, or tacit confusion thereof. She figured Molly already knew – Tara had rarely gone out with guys and had pinups of Fairuza Balk taped up next to her bedside. She even surmised that Molly might even have secretly enjoyed the fact of her roommate and best friend's ambiguous sexual preferences, if her

heavily-lesbianic scripts for the vampire comic were any indication. But no, Molly acted skeeved beyond belief and even suggested one of them move out. No more talk of anything even mildly *Xena* in the witches' household. And instead of allowing herself to feel angry or hold grudges over Molly's anti-gay rantings, which, for a Witch, sounded not that dissimilar to that of a radically conservative Christian's, Tara simply resolved to resolve the situation by calling on the Gods for some good ol' American dick.

The last good night the two girls shared, Tori Amos spun in the CD boom-box and the cheesy pink lights that they had strung around the two narrow windows in the room flared against the navy of the night, black of deep night not yet having arrived. They discussed their frustrations over not getting the vampire comic published, speculated on how they could self-publish it, complained about how guys only stared at their tits, and discussed the merits of the Great Invocation they had practiced at the Luna Park ruins at Coney Island and what the ramifications would be. Tara suggested hopefully that perhaps they would get some big reward from the Gods that would solve their job worries, get their comic published, and make them very successful. Molly was quiet for a minute in response, lost in her own unsaid suspicions that the magick was worthless, then answered that they would have to make a bigger invocation, even bigger and more elaborate than the Great Invocation. This excited the girls very much, who did some preliminary speculations on what ingredients to use in the herbal preparations, and that they might even procure a rabbit or a snake or something to sacrifice--yes, it was at the point in their occult journey that some small sacrifices would have to be performed, to appease the Gods. Though Tara's enthusiasm regarding cutting herself and bleeding upon the altar did seem to pay more dividends than had Molly's solo magick ever did before, Molly commented that it was time for an actual sacrifice – a snake, a rabbit, a bird, a rat, a cat – something, and it wasn't bad, it was *Biblical* for Pete's sake, in the bible they were sacrificing whole kennels of animals in one shot. This was a departure from Molly's earlier opinions on the subject, but Tara understood (kind of, in a jumbled sort of way), that they were reaching a critical point in their lives and their

development; though the brown-haired witch was a little disappointed that her own blood was no longer sufficient, because she had taken a little bit of pride in her ability to bleed.

And so on that last good night of that last good day Tara Amadeo and Molly Griep passed out in each other's arms, a small army of empty Bartles and Jaymes bottles and cans of Foster's littered beside them. And late the next afternoon, when Molly came back early from classes, she found Tara and the cute Goth boy from the library fucking each other on that same floor to the sound of Led Zeppelin's "A Whole Lotta Love."

*** **

Tara Amadeo, glamoured as the Vampire Hunter, hadn't an itinerary for the few chilly, rain-spattered hours that remained before dawn. And she was too keyed-up to go back home after her experiences with Marta and her bitches, and then the little bullshit talk with Malcolm, and besides, whenever she spotted the Dead out of the corners of her eyes she felt better away, outside, among others even if those others were and would remain anonymous. By the time she reached 14th and 5th Avenue it was decided that she would head to Chelsea and see if she could trick some gay guy into sleeping with her; anal seemed a good way to close out the night, and after the vampire incident earlier in the day she hadn't much patience with chicks. By 6th Avenue she had seamlessly transformed from the Hunter to her stock male glamour – almost the same height, but with a slighter yet defined build, short brown hair and the face and general appearance of a model for a third or fourth tier department store circular. The rain poured down on her new body, and as it did so she let the blood that had been glamoured invisible show through – she relished the way the water wore through it, sending pale red streaks and small dark brown chunks sailing down into the stream, down and away in the puddles that formed from the clogged sewer drains. She stood there as the Guy, head up and welcoming the deluge, intensely picturing herself clean, as if positive thinking alone could

achieve it.

At 8th Avenue she trudged to the 20s and kept her eyes peeled for some sort of opportunity; the itinerary changed a bit from a simple fuck-quest to finding some sort of place to crash...getting dry and then perhaps a quick bout of anal or some mutual oral at the very least. Self-preservation first and then a fuck – it was a creed to live by, though not everybody in this world did so. And then she heard the lilting, almost spectral sounds of a party, of dance music – disco-duck bullshit but with a bass that shook car windows in their frames – and she looked up and saw at the far end of the block was a marquee and an assortment of male bodies huddling under it, a few brave souls peeking out from the shelter and squinting into the street to attract a car with a crisp snap of their fingers. When Tara got a few steps closer she could make out the black letters on the marquee: “Los Lost Boys.” *Well, this is fucking hilarious*, Tara thought, picking up her pace, combing out her wet hair with her man’s fingers, and glamouring out the remaining blood as she approached. The music was overwhelming, now, pounding against the industrial-looking door that was littered with spent bubblegum and torn posters. A youngish-looking Latino guy in a shiny red button shirt and an expensive pair of silver mirrored glasses turned away from a conversation with two other men and flicked his hand against Tara’s jacket. Tara scrutinized his features and those of his companions thoroughly as to satisfy for herself that they weren’t vampires.

“Oh my *God*,” the man exclaimed in an affected Valley-Girl squeal. “Look at you – *you’re soaked to the bone!*”

Tara as the Guy smiled sheepishly in self-deprecation.

“Forgot my umbrella,” she said, shrugging her shoulders and then slipping away from his hand and through the doors of the club; he was cute enough but tonight Tara wanted to bag a blond. She fished out some soggy old receipts from the coat’s pockets and mind-tricked the heavysset, middle-aged queen with the bald head and the pirate-like goatee at the collection table into thinking it was money.

“Sorry about the bills being all wet and all – forgot my umbrella.”

“That’s all right, honey,” the older man cooed, eyeing the masculine yet

delicate turns of Tara's glamourised face appreciatively. "You get all nice and *warmed up* in there."

It was sort of reassuring, in a the-world-is-round sort of way, for Tara to know that men, regardless of their sexual persuasion, were in essence horny motherfuckers whose first instinct was to drool over choice meat. At least the homosexual guys cut down on the pretense and just got to it – women, gay or straight, were just too fucking complicated, had too many motives and needs, and often many of those motives and needs contradictory. Every once in a while she needed to pluck herself from the land of the Amazons and just pick an environment that contained pure, unadulterated no-frills testosterone – which Los Lost Boys provided in spades. Just the *smell* of it – the musk coming off of bodies in that dark, crowded, neon-splashed room – got Tara high.

"Check your coat, hon?" asked the Pirate.

Tara peeled the soaked pea-green army jacket off her man's body and deposited it unceremoniously in a pail.

"You can keep my coat," she replied before seeping into the maelstrom.

The witch didn't realize how oppressive the Hunter's clothes felt on her, the disturbing aura of killing and death that clung to it – only vampire death, true, but every such action or murder carries its stamp, regardless of the reasons or the nature of the victims. If she had her way, she'd dump the damp white T-shirt and faded blue jeans as well and start anew with the first rays of the sunlight, but strolling around the city clad only in underwear had the potential to get her involved in even more adventures, and all the adventures the witch seemed to attract had no prize, no chest of gold, held no hope for a well-deserved rest. There was something to be said for capers in which the journey was the real reward, but as Tara slumped on a Lucite barstool and wearily perused the choice of beer on tap with her dark brown man's eyes, as she quietly folded a paper napkin in two, neatly ripping it down the middle, and using it to pay for the Guinness she just ordered--no, she was really tired. She had just enough strength to keep the glamour up, and even the stability of that wasn't of infinite duration.

Tara looked down at her glamourised hands – so very realistic, and so pale. *Pasty*. She gritted her teeth and concentrated on darkening the color of the skin a notch or two, providing it with a nice healthy olive tone. It was like fucking Baywatch in the joint with all the tanned bodies, some as orange as Oompa-Loompas. At any rate – they were certainly not vampires – and then Tara herself felt like the vampire, the predator, the liar, the infiltrator, and she wondered if anybody would notice, if humans really did have a built-in detection system. And if even they did, would they jump into the flames anyway? How could anybody – male or female – be intimate with the Witch and not be effected in some way, not have that chaos energy rub off on them like chalk dust? What did Molly tell her? Oh yes, that her blood was a contaminant – viral magick – and that she contained an “essential darkness.” Tara drank her beer fast, savoring the sting of the coldness and the bitterness of the dusky liquid. She tried to will herself to let go of these taut, wire-like unresolved ribbons of her past, at least for the night – put the ghost to bed and garner a fuck to reassure her.

Several beers later she struck a conversation with a tall, rather feline-looking bleached blond with wavy hair that fell roguishly upon his forehead in curls like a boy-adventurer. His roots were black, as were his eyebrows, but it all looked so tasty, so *good* in a cheap glamorous sort of way. A black spandex shirt advantageously displayed his lean, well-toned body...his elegant but muscled neck draped with a thick gold herringbone necklace. Things this man said to her: in her inebriated, horny condition it all sounded like abahbahbah...yes, *whatever*. He was the perfect blank canvas on which to paint her desires and neuroses. Some missing time later they were dancing, her apparent male form struggling to keep up with the smooth, soulful motions of his body. In the crush of the humanity on the dance floor, in the bump and friction of so many undulating fit bodies pumping to the beat of some fucked-up Dead or Alive song via Tavares.

Tara was mesmerized by the blue eyes and angular beauty of her companion, and she wondered if her glamourised body held the same appeal to him, what people perceived of this Not-Tara. *Glamoury* – the ability to cast

illusions, in this case change one's physical appearance – was a type of out-of-body experience, it undermined one's identity and personal reality in ways that may not be completely apparent at the time, even for the experienced. The witch knew intuitively that the accumulated effects of such work would not be good for her...but many do things they know are not healthy just to stay afloat, just to deal with this life. Tonight it was just this person Tara pretended to be and this man, and if it is true that reality only exists in the Now, in the fleeting moment, then that was all that was necessary.

Then she saw the Dead.

*** **

It came upon her with no warning, as her dance partner's face became as white as bone – his lips, his hair, the drawn quality of his skin against his high cheekbones and clefted chin, and pulled back slightly around his teeth and shrunk at the tip of his nose so it pointed upward. Tara had not been able to be so close to the dead and see its stable form in quite a long long time, and she instinctively wrenched herself from its placid countenance and looked to either side of her--everybody, it was all the Dead, the dead dancing, the mirrored walls and ceiling multiplying their gaunt, alabaster figures. The witch focused on her partner again, her corpse-like partner not menacing or bestial as one might expect the Dead to be, but calm and pleasant, suddenly clasping her man's hands into her own- – the cold, gentle grip – and he told Tara,

“It's fine. It's going to be fine. Relax on Friday. We all need to rest eventually. Don't fight it.”

It was too claustrophobic, too inescapable, for the witch to even contemplate fighting it, to even attempt to get away. She felt her heart drop in her chest like a depth charge into places unknown, and her body temperature plummet--and she knew that if she just rode this grotesque little episode out it would pass, as it always passed. Just wait it out...a little while longer...

And then everything was as it was before.

The man ducked close to Tara's ear as if to whisper, but actually it was a scream that rose above the deafening cacophony of voices and the music –

“This place blows – there’s a party in Williamsburg going on, I have a friend – do you want to come?”

The witch’s dry throat croaked out a reply, but the blond man couldn’t hear it, so she yelled it out again,

“I said, I’d love to come.”

The man rubbed the hardness of his crotch against Tara’s glamourised male body and bent his mouth in a wicked smile.

“I’ll *bet* you love to come...”

The Dead – it maybe reappeared for a frame or two, a few seconds or the time it takes to close and open one’s eyes – but it was really okay, it was just a brief aftershock. Tara downed another Guinness for the road and headed out the door with her new companion.

The train ride was all just more missing time, punctuated by some slurry, flirty small-talk, and then the witch realized she had just passed that critical point in one’s drinking binge where control was lost, where senses are on autopilot and get temperamental and unreliable and one’s soul is trapped in the independent body. The party was equally as loud as Los Lost Boys, but the music was contemporary Top 40, some poppy teen songs mixed with hip-hop. The witch promptly lost touch with the attractive blond man, who apparently knew quite a few people there and got swallowed by the crowd. And Tara started feeling nauseous, awkwardly feeling her way through the small hipster apartment, regretting she came and knowing no one and feeling ill and acutely aware of her shredded identity. Waiting in line for the john was a torture, barely able to stand up, folding her man’s arms in front of her body and trying not to look vulnerable when meanwhile her insides were collapsing into muck.

Once in the bathroom Tara locked the door and swung her head around so she was facing the medicine cabinet. The sounds of the party were muffled and distant and seemingly came from some other life. She stared at her glamourised man’s face in the mirror and allowed the blood remnants to reappear. Then she put her hands to the face, pushing its cheeks in, regarding it as if it was some indistinct hunk of flesh. Horrible. Horrible. All of it, all those years, and now

she didn't even have a face to identify with. She changed back to her original body but still it was unfamiliar. Her right leg began to tremble. Who was this person staring back at her, in this strange apartment? What exactly had she accomplished in her life, other than a series of irresponsible magickal maneuvers and several issues of a vampire comic book that would never be read? *What* life? What was this life? What was she living—

And this—damn—*blood*! Blood of herself and the killing aura of the Hunter—who the fuck *was* she? *What* was she? What was this place? And was she really the Hunter, all that time, or was it just a memory of something else—

And the goddamn blood!

She climbed into the small white bathtub, yanked the silver, slightly mildew-stained handle, and let the water pour...

*** **

When Tara awoke, she was under water, had been for some time, and apparently wasn't dead. Her eyes opened to the sight of what at first she thought was the cute blond guy that had taken her — or rather, her glamourised form — to the party. But a closer examination of the wide-eyed, somewhat concerned looking man in a blue bathrobe clutching a plunger defensively to his chest revealed that it was indeed not that man, but another one in possession of superficial similarities to him. He was, for one thing, far shorter, and as delicate-boned as a mouse. He had blond hair, true, but it seemed natural and amassed on his scalp in tight curls. Large blue orbs stared out of his head in not-unkind apprehension as he spoke,

“Y-you...you're *alive*? *Really*? Uhm...*why*?”

How silly of me, thought Tara, making the little man jump as she lifted the upper half of her body Nosferatu-like from the water.

“I...I forgot my umbrella.”

CHAPTER THREE (A NOVELLA): TURNED

I.

“Mommy, tell me a story?”

The little boy looked up from his bed at Mia – his mother solid and soft, his mother the smell of freshly-cleaned cotton. Her white sweater reflecting the light of the lamp, the supple fade of old blue jeans, long brown hair hanging about her face, her skin warm and rosy.

“Of *course*...” Mia scanned the books in her son’s shelf...so many titles, some familiar, some she could not recognize, some printed faded on the tattered spines of her own books...the books she read when *she* was little. It was from one of those that she read the tale.

“Once upon a time, there was a prince and princess who lived happily in a castle...”

“Mom, you *read* that story yesterday.”

“I’m sorry...I must be very tired. Okay...and so then...”

“Mom?”

“And then...”

“Mom?”

“And...”

“*Mommy, what’s happening to you?!*”

“What–”

Her son shrunk back in his bed, shrieking like a mishandled kitten; his screams pierced through Mia, disorienting her before she even had a chance to gather her wits and be properly concerned. And the light...the nursery suddenly flooded with a harsh, overpowering illumination that swallowed the relatively minor glow of the lamp. Mia froze, her mind racing, trying to think, trying to think what was wrong...

“It’s okay, honey...it’s okay...I’m just very very *tired*...” It was Mia’s sweater—there was a bloody patch, slowly spreading, spreading out from her chest.

“Mommy, make it stop...make it stop...”

“I...I’m sorry...I’m sorry...I’m sorry...” The sweater was crimson with fresh blood, an open wound flowing free from her chest. A sickening sound like a rusty zipper opening, and a long fissure formed at the left side of Mia’s neck, spurting gore. She quickly brought a hand to the new gash, trying to hold the hot scarlet fluid back but it ran between her fingers. The boy’s small form convulsed on the bed, eyes rolling white, a display that no longer told of mere fear and terror but an overwhelming illness of the nerves, a systemic failure. And the little lamp was still on, lost in the larger illumination.

Mia stumbled away from the bed, her ever frantic and thoroughly confused apologies tripping over one another, apologies without understanding of the reason, apologies rote and instinctual. Puddles of herself formed on the floor, soaking her white Keds, her essence fast escaping.

Suddenly her husband’s voice:

“How could you bleed so much and not die? What’s happened to you?”

His strong, athletic form shadowed by the flood of light behind him, but she could recognize the familiar flinty green of his tapered, deep-set eyes, the fleshiness of his lips – she reached a hand out and shakily threaded it through his dark wavy hair. “Frank, it’s...going to be okay.”

“What’s happened to you?”

“I’m sorry...”

“What did you *do*?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know...”

He grabbed her arms and started to shake her, trying to convince her:

“Mia: there’s no more blood left in you. You’re dead. *You’re dead!*”

“No...”

Shake harder, head rocking like a doll, head hanging onto neck by threads, tendons:

“You’re dead, you’re dead...”

“No...”

Her skin was white and her clothing was splattered brown with old blood—how long had she and Frank been standing there, in the blinding flare of the room, in the overwhelming Daytime—

Dried blood.

“You’re dead,” Frank said matter-of-factly, as if the matter was settled.

“No...*no*! I’m not dead, Frank! I’m not dead...I’m sorry...but I’m...not...*dead*...”

She loosened herself from his grip and put her hand to her mouth – inside her mouth she felt ache, she felt ache like a baby aches when his gums start breaking open, she opened her mouth wider, lips and jaw stretching to accommodate both hands in an effort to stop the ache, to feel the ache...

“Frank...”

“Yes, dear?”

“I’m *hungry*...”

Mia walked in a daze to her son’s bed. There was no longer any son. There was no longer any bed. There was no longer any room, or light, or Frank. Her palette felt as if it was splitting in two.

*** **

Mia’s torso shot upright in a sitting position with such force that it made her floral bed sheets fly into the air like splashed water. Her slender body was soaked in sweat, the plaid Winnie The Pooh nightgown she wore wet and sticky and uncomfortable. She was in the bed she shared with her husband, Frank, and he turned and responded quickly, automatically, ready to assess and stabilize the situation. He stroked her shoulder, reassuringly kneading her skin through the damp pink-and-yellow flannel.

“It’s okay, honey...what happened, what happened to you?”

“I’M SORRY!! I DON’T KNOW!! I’M SORRY!!!”

The headboard was made of pink Formica, two shells molded upon the surface and coated with a translucent paint that shone several shades of pastel in the light, just like mother of pearl; a wedding gift from Frank's parents, who also bought the matching bureau, night tables, lamps, mirror, and armoire. On the wall directly above their heads was a reproduction of Botticelli's "The Birth Of Venus," with the word Botticelli printed across the bottom in golden letters. To the right of that picture and somewhat lower, on Frank's side, was a Spartan little portrait of Jesus, the face partially obscured by a baby-blue plastic rosary that was draped across its surface.

On Frank's night table was a dog-eared Tom Clancy novel, a half-drunk yellow tumbler of water, and a digital alarm clock with a finish that made it look like it was carved from mahogany wood; inside resided his .38, his badge, his wallet, another Clancy novel, and the majority of a Captain Action model kit that he had when he was a kid. Upon Mia's table were a careful assortment of little stuffed animals, curios, and greeting cards, as well as a cardboard Kleenex dispenser with a happy patter of flowers on the box; inside the table's drawers were her framed diploma from Queens College, Advil, Jergen's Sensitive Skin Lotion, the old remote control from before they had cable, two maxipads neatly wrapped in their pink cases, several pairs of old eyeglasses, and an Altoids tin full of Xanax.

Frank told her everything was going to be okay, gently grabbing her pulse-throbbled wrists in order to hold her steady and also to prevent her from accidentally hitting him; she wasn't fully awake, and a couple of weeks ago, in such a state as she was now, she had rolled over in bed and smacked him in the face. It came as a total shock to him, though she really didn't hurt him, because he was bigger than her. But it was just the principal of the thing, and though Frank was not the type of man to get angry over the little Mars-and-Venus misunderstandings that so inlaid domestic life, he just had to insist that she discuss the incident with her therapist, a joint session including himself if need be.

Frank was cool about Mia getting professional help and all.

“I-I was bleeding, Frank, there was blood *everywhere*...”

She’s probably going to have her period soon, Frank thought as he led her body back down to the mattress. *Symbolism*.

He gently tucked his wife back in, smoothing back the tendrils of hair that stuck to her forehead; helping her descend from the edge of arousal and back into the stillness, into the calmness. When Frank was sure she was asleep, he crept out of bed, went into the living room, and watched ESPN with the volume off.

He thought:

She was artistic, this was normal...

It was all due to her...

What do you call it? “Muse.”

Olivia Newton-John had played a muse in Xanadu, Frank remembered, that was where he got the concept that he brought forth just now lying upon the beige leather sofa, in the two-piece striped pajama set Mia had bought him on sale at Target. He remembered how the muses were all painted on a wall, like those big murals you see in poor neighborhoods that advertise record stores or dead gang members. All of the sudden, they popped off the wall and turned into solid people, and they were dancing and everything. Then they turned into pure light and zipped away all over the world.

You never see that movie on TV very often anymore, he thought.

On ESPN, a Chinese ice-skater in pigtails whipped across the stage, her silver skirt raising in the air just long enough to see her ass.

He changed channels. Rhoda was greeting Mary at the door, Mary invites her in and offers her coffee.

Changed channels. Women in chainmail.

His narrow green eyes grew ever narrower as he leaned forward and tried to figure out –

Xena?

No, just some bad B-movie barbarian-girl lesbo flick.

Channels.

Beetlejuice was about to marry Lydia. Geena Davis tried to stop it but Michael Keaton made a gesture with his hand and her lips turned into a closed zipper. She opened it but he nailed it shut with a metal sheet.

Channels. A woman tossed a bucket full of nasty stuff on her brand-new linoleum floor and just wiped it effortlessly away with a special cleaner. He watched this with interest for a while, fascinated by the ever-dirtier situations that came up to challenge the blue cleaning fluid. He made a mental note to mention this to Mia, because she might find it useful.

Channels. Back to Beetlejuice. Lydia danced in the air as a team of mangled football players sang Harry Belafonte.

Frank impulsively grabbed the cordless phone that was resting upon the wood-tone Formica coffee table and punched in Myra's number. After the second ring he hung up.

He clicked the "time" function on the remote and an ugly green 2:30 flashed on the screen in boxy Tron letters. "It's probably too late," he whispered to himself, nodding.

II.

Joshua Owen Brundage went down to 7th and caught the D into Manhattan. He fished out of the pocket of his green army jacket the token that he had found on the floor of the crowded taco place; it was no accident he found the token, God takes care of His defenders and sends them prepared on their merry path like children bundled tight in hooded parkas and gloves and scarves on their way to the bus stop during the whistling fury of a snow storm. But he was beyond being tickled by such trivia. He dropped the token – which, if you looked closely at the hole in its center would reveal its five-sided nature to you – into the machine.

He sat by himself in the last seat of the last car, his red vinyl duffle-bag beside him. His hair, the mixture of yellow and white making it look dirty, hung

down his neck in a braid. He took out the tiny green Gideon's Bible that his friend Mac gave him after his family died and started reading psalms at random. The good thing about the psalms were, they were always relevant, no matter which one he picked. Joshua got the same sense that they were written expressly for him, about him, that teenagers did when they read Judy Blume books. In the lamentations about persecution, rebellion, vengeance, and divine assistance, he found direction and solace – though not enough solace that he could do without the flask of Jack Daniels that was soon produced from the front section of his duffel bag. He bent the corner of the page he was reading and shut the book, resting it in his lap as he let the harsh fluid burn down his throat and settle in a comforting warmth that would soon heat his chest. This heat was the closest thing he ever felt to being alive anymore – or orgasms, for that matter.

Across from him was an advertisement for a health insurance plan for low-income families featuring two little girls, one Hispanic and one Black. Scrawled across their faces in pen were the words Future Hookers. Now, I would notice something like that if I was coming home from my ass-flattening 9 to 5, but Joshua Brundage stopped seeing things a long time ago. He was on autopilot, and no longer saw, he felt. And it was a selective process of feeling, because there was only one thing he stuck his feelers out for – and when that thing was not there, he was the zombie that sat staring into the air on the last seat of the last car of the D, his pale blue eyes slick and sightless, and deep within his body an ulcer dripped acid and blood like a leaky faucet.

*** **

Officers Cefalu & Rooke expressionlessly observed the stampede of teenagers barrel in and out of the trains at the West 4th Street subway platform. The children were of indeterminate race, age, and personality to these two policemen – just masses of baggy hoodlum pants, heavy-soled sneakers, swinging bookbags, knit caps, North Face jackets, and the detritus of post-recess snacks (or was it dinner?) trailing behind in their wake. The kids avoided the cops

and the cops avoided the kids, both parties with their own jobs to do and truly not desiring any trouble with the other. (Oh sure, William Rooke had his little moments of off-the-cuff profiling, a crack of his club on a brown head – but Cefalu saved his ass, testified on his behalf, reined him in.)

Frank Cefalu was a firm believer in avoiding trouble, but that didn't make him a bad cop; he just chose to go about his profession in an orderly, logical way. Frank tried to turn the indeterminate into the determinate. He saw his job as the processing of humanity through pre established laws – the restoration of peace where there was chaos. No sense starting chaos where there was a relative peace.

Another train pulled up to the platform, another set of indeterminacy poured out. Frank said something to Billy, but it was drowned out by the sounds – feet, wheel screech against rail, voices, door slam, bottle roll against concrete and SMASH! onto the tracks below.

“...so I've been introducing some, you know, *drama* into the bedroom.”

“Like what, Frank?” Billy asked in a clipped Staten Island accent, slipping a stick of Doublemint in his mouth.

“Like...I bought this, you know, *thong*...”

“You bought a thong? Don't those things get stuck in your ass-crack?”

“It's just to add some adventure, that's all. Mia likes that stuff. She's *artistic*.”

“Doublemint?”

“Oh, no thanks, I'm working on a Clorets.”

“How's she doing, by the way?”

“She's doing ok,” Frank said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “The agency she's at now likes her. They'll keep her, I think. She hates the phones, though.”

“But Frank, ain't she a receptionist?”

“It's not the talking. It's the ringing. She hates the ringing.”

“So you never answered my question.”

“What question?”

“Don't those things get stuck in your ass-crack?”

“Fuck you.”

But it was a good-natured “fuck you.”

*** **

Xuchera slept under the bed. A heavy king-size gray wool blanket covered the twin mattress, entombing the foot-and-a-half of space below in total darkness. There, the room’s cream-colored shag rug was matted with soil, and she lay on her stomach, face pressed against the earth-smearred fibers, breath shushing through them, cold-comforted fingers locked around handfuls of the pile.

Her room had a peculiar odor, one you can sense more than actually smell. In the scramble to come up with an initial word to describe it, one might use “filth,” but that’s too cruel a term to describe a scent with such a melancholy twist. This was the tang of ancient sex, of the aura you can’t quite get out of the furniture, of the semen and blood that found its way to posterity thanks to the porosity of worn wood and cheap drywall. Such odors are landmarks to the events that change lives and linger for as long as you do, and longer. In the wake of the vanisher are remnants, nothing left but the landmark, the 28-year-old woman who sleeps under her bed in the daytime, to crawl out at night and see the purple-navy sky stained with retreating scarlet and be reborn, even happy.

This was not life?

Not from lack of trying, but Xuchera’s parents were not able to give her what she wanted. Contact had ceased. Perhaps, a year or so ago, she might have rattled off a note to them, or call on a holiday like Easter. However, the longer you live within the space of your infection, soul rattling within pale skin that almost has a light-blue cast to it, like skim milk – the sentimental dissolves, you sweat it out when you’re on your 30th kill. The day when there was no easy mark but the twelve-year-old walking home past the construction site, carrying his skateboard under his arm, fresh prepubescent stink from a day spent improvising wheelies at Union Square. She didn’t even bother offering a trick to lure him in, it

would have been too complicated...she just punctured him and shoved him down the pit that would one day become another HMV or Borders Books, it took less than five minutes.

Her stomach growled.

"I need a MAN..." Xuchera thought. Only a full-grown man, yards of thick veins lining his skin, could satisfy her desire tonight – the crow's feet that started to spread like a demure frost from the corners of her eyes testified to that.

But it would mean the whore gambit.

She started kneading foundation into her face with dry, chapped fingers. "Desert Bloom," it said on the bottle. Got to get a little color in there. No sense scaring a potential john off, make him think she's got some sort of STD or something. Her hand paused for a second.

"Yeah, don't want them to think I've got some sort of *contagious disease*, or anything..."

A deep, throaty chuckle vibrated through the room; then Xuchera proceeded with the blush, blending it with her thumb into the tan face-paint to create a canvas of health. The application complete, she poked at her long blond hair a bit with the sharp end of a styling comb, grabbed her little green leather jacket, and left.

She didn't even bother to try the elevator this time, because it was obvious to her that the damn thing would never get fixed. And why would anybody bother to fix it, who gave a shit about the borders in this hotel? Xuchera drifted past closed doors that sheltered behaviors and indulgences so obscene, it made one single vampire in her late twenties catching for herself a bit of liquid-mercury seem not so bad, *boring*, even...

(Nobody is going to fix the fucking elevator, ever...)

Two hours later and no luck. She stole glimpses of herself in car windows and bus shelters, trying to figure out if it was her appearance that was keeping them away...had she gone too long without? How old did she really look? Dammit, she wasn't that old to begin with! This was supposed to happen to vampires in their 70s and 80s. She nervously poked at her hair with her fingers,

feeling the weight of her locks, trying to buoy volume in an area that had always been her pride, that had always secured attention...

It was a keenly bitter night, sooty dark puddles that had only this afternoon been alive and swimming with paper cups and motor oil were frozen solid...an uncomfortable temperature for a human, perhaps, but imperceptible to a vampire. That must be it, Xuchera thought, the cold, it's too cold, that's why nobody wants to stick around. She smiled to herself at this realization, her ego once again intact...but the slow growl hit her again...

"I'm hungry. *Fuck*. What shitty weather. What am I going to do now?"

Pull a sleeping babe out of a first-floor window? Whatever happened to romance?

Then, in the distance, she could see a large, loitering figure pacing in front of a row of metal-gated stores. He would walk down the block, look around, gaze for a moment at nothing, put his head down, pace back. Suddenly he stopped and looked in her direction. Xuchera couldn't exactly see the squint his craggy eyes were narrowing into, but she could almost feel it, pinching her ass. He looked away from her, paced again in heavy, labored steps, then looked at her again, squinting.

Right then and there, she dubbed him "The Squinter." He was obviously interested, or else he'd be home with his darling wife and kids. She walked towards him, relishing the way the wind picked up her mane at the moment, transforming it into an inviting, grasping golden crown. Upon closer inspection, The Squinter was a man in his late forties/early fifties, tall and sort of military-looking...but dressed in worn jeans and an olive-green jacket, a soldier's body marred with a palatable awkwardness, as if he didn't know where to stick his dick. On his back was slung a canvas sports bag filled with what appeared to be garbage, broken things – okay, he obviously fucked up somewhere along the line, maybe a mental patient, maybe a drug-user. The question was, did he have enough marbles left in him to want a blow-job?

"Hi," she asked in an amicable Midwestern lilt, "want a blow job?"

His narrow eyes squinted in reverse for a second, widening just a touch as

to appear shocked, vulnerable...interested...

He stared at her for a second, motionless except for two fingers on his left hand scraping against each other anxiously. He was old, but still solid enough to make a good meal that would last for days if need be. Xuchera remembered a phrase an old girlfriend of hers had used, back in the days when she first arrived in New York – *you don't ask, you don't get*.

And since what she wanted was HIM, preferably not in an open street where nosy busybodies could watch from a passing bus or stick their heads out the window..she would have to ask, ask, ask, get this show moving, be *done* with this absurd dance already...

She pressed her thin body against his, rubbing her crotch against his faded denim package, grinding her fingers over his chest in a circular motion like one does to glass opaque with condensation – the friction an attempt to get him stimulated, get him moving, preferably to a nice abandoned area...

“Ooooh, *I really want to fuck you...*wanna go somewhere where we can fuck?”

His expression was blank and squinting, and Xuchera stopped in mid-grind, worried that she made a fool of herself or he was a cop or something. She didn't want any trouble, any exposure, all she wanted was a simple puncture and she was off the streets and under the bed for a while, really, that's all she wanted.

He spoke, and the sound he made had the roughness and pop of old vinyl scratched by the needle.

“In the alley behind the movie theater?”

Xuchera, her spirits lifted by the anticipation of a real kill, slinked her hand into his pants and encased his flaccid member with her cold palm and fingers. The Squinter breathed in, sharp and shallow, at the touch of the icy skin, but his teeth gritted in such a fashion as if he knew what he was getting into, and it was all right by him.

*** **

In the largeness of the City many things can go overlooked. You find a black velvet clutch from a gala event resting atop an overflowing dumpster, nobody notices; you notice, you pick it up, look inside, put it back. You make the determination that such an elegant item must be diseased in some way, to be abandoned lonely in such a seedy part of town; perhaps it is laced with a phantom immunodeficiency virus, perhaps a needle is hiding within a secret compartment. Perhaps it is just *skanky*.

In theory, the body in the alley went unnoticed a full day; though it had caught the eyes of several individuals of varying backgrounds and points of reference. There was the young man in the Dickies khakis coming home from Pearl Paint, fresh canvas under his arm and a can of gesso swinging from his fingertips, who thought the gray, shriveled form that hung from the fence was some sort of “street art,” like the stencils of Andre the Giant or the purple footprints. There was the homeless woman in her sixties with the scabby, swollen legs wrapped in gauze who came across the dead woman with the long, blond, hair and thought it was some sort of sign, a religious totem, and crossed herself before the angel’s feet and left. And there were the heroin addicts from out-of-town, scarecrows in their thirties with black garbage bags full of their possessions, who after ducking into the alley to shoot up took one look at the body and decided they were in enough trouble as it was & split.

Finally a Yuppie couple carrying a baby in a Guatemalan knit papoose, who were loitering around the general vicinity of the theater – waiting for the 4:45 showing of “Follow That Dinosaur!”, starring William Hurt, Jessica Lange, and Gene Hackman as that asshole Broyer – passed by the alley, looked at the corpse, and called the police.

By the time “Follow That Dinosaur!” reached the crucial part of the film where Hurt reveals to Lange why he became a purple rodeo dinosaur, there were many cops canvassing the area--many, many much more than were needed to handle one person who didn’t seem to be in a position to be a danger to herself or anybody else.

Cefalu and Rooke were greeted at the scene by a short, jovial, pudgy female officer, her thick brown hand beckoning them as if she was barking the Giant Rat or Jack and Jill the Two-Headed Formaldehyde Baby.

C'mon, c'mon, something new, something new...

Cefalu silently braced himself; in his line of work, “new” never meant “good” (though some officers thrived on viewing the aftermath of an unusual kill, it fired up their neurons and made them think and be outraged and have something of interest to tell their wives and girlfriends).

Rooke gestured at the body hanging from the wall.

“That’s fucked up, right there...” he said in an even tone.

A tall, blond woman – prostitute, obviously – was impaled on the dirty gray fence that blocked off the alley. Two wooden, spearlike objects were used, apparently homemade because they don’t sell things like that in the sporting goods section of K-Mart. Particularly striking was the manner of the impalement, one in the chest and one through the mouth.

Cefalu couldn’t help but stare at the latter penetration, the copious amount of blood, dried and dark, plastering her chin and neck; the halo of broken teeth that fringed the spear, most pried out of their original position and resting horizontally inward, roots exposed and black with fluid. Rooke motioned with his hand again, speaking with the same low, even voice he used before.

“Yep, we’ve got some sick people around here.”

“Yep. That is truly fucked up.”

“One of the most fucked up things I’ve ever seen on the force...”

“Truly. Fucked. Up.”

Cefalu pinched the bridge of his nose, between the eyes. Rooke patted him on the back.

“Beer after work?”

They turned around and left.

“Sounds good.”

“Darts?”

“Darts, darts sounds good.”

III.

In the vampire community, when a vampire gets destroyed, news travels rather quickly – because vampires are rather hard to destroy.

It's simple, really.

A 21-year-old vampire named Judy Lu heard it from another vampire named Chad, who was working at the all-night copy shop on Astor. Judy was a member of a clan called The Caress, and rushed back to inform her brethren. Chad was not a member of any particular clan, and he also made the unusual career choice of having a career. This was because being a vampire did not make Chad any more sociable than he was before, and he needed a daily forum in which he could come into contact with many different people, some of which he would befriend or follow home after work and kill. Chad was 34, and collected vintage Star Wars action figures – only vintage, not that new shit.

Judy didn't collect anything, as she was rather colorless, even as far as the undead go. Becoming a vampire was completely her choice, because she specifically wished to make no more independent choices. Her head was shaved except for two tight pink ponytails that stood straight out the top of her head like streamers on the handles of a tricycle. A silver cuff pierced her lip and was attached to a chain that terminated with another cuff through the upper cartilage of her left ear. Atop an electric blue spandex bra she wore a black tank-top made of an irregular, unraveling mesh that gave it the appearance of a cobweb. The silver vinyl skirt that circled her thin, bare legs looked like a gaudy Vegas lampshade, and her fluorescent green Converse hightops, customized with layers of extra rainbow-colored sole, added several inches to her petite frame. Through her tongue was a piece of metal that looked like a miniature barbell (like a precious jewel presented voluptuously upon a pillow of velvet, Rache thought, as Judy dutifully used it on her). In other words, Judy looked like every other woman in Clan Caress.

Judy walked down, down, down Broadway, just past where things stopped

being fashionable, past The Antique Boutique, Urban Outfitters, Canal Jeans, French Connection, down to the place past the sad street market on 4th Street where desperate souls selling off their old clothes and family photographs rubbed shoulders with naive bohos selling handmade pottery & greeting cards. There, past the invisible border that visitors universal, from Jersey or Japan, recognized as the place to turn and double-back up Broadway, or perhaps hop a cab to the South Street Seaport, was an area in which Starbucks feared to tread.

She stopped before a seemingly abandoned storefront for an establishment that only seemed to sell a certain type of sausage. There was a pyramid of the boxes for this product stacked in the window, atop a counter made of white tile. Also on this counter was a white deli hat and apron. Beyond, though the lights were off, you could make out more white tile, more sausage boxes stacked neatly on shelves, and a gleaming silver meat-slicer. Judy took out a key and opened up the door next to the establishment, walked up two flights of narrow stairs, and entered the headquarters of The Caress.

The surroundings were a cross between an angry but artistically gifted seven-year-old with ADD and the cabin where Heather & Mike lost their lives in The Blair Witch Project. The white paint on the doors and walls had shrunk and cracked away from itself over time, forming a scabby grid that revealed the faded hunter green beneath. Perhaps in another area, with another set of tenants, the atmosphere created by the distressed paint might have almost been considered hip, a faux-gothic masterpiece to be showcased surrounding Versace bedding and quaint relics from Mongolia in a spread for Elle Decor. But though the likes of Madonna and Willem Dafoe practiced yoga together in a building six, maybe eight blocks away tops, this neighborhood was beyond the rainbow and home to a specific brand of creature to which the ironies contained in the concept of “shabby chic” were lost, where avant-garde could not truly exist within the absence of distance from the absurd, the grotesque. It was as if RuPaul was really a woman, where’s the charm in that?

Posters and pictures and yellowing pages torn from newspapers were taped indiscriminately along the walls, images of love-lovies and butterfly cunts

and grim girly-boys unsmiling in cemeteries and doomed goth icon Rob Sullivan as the Sweet Hereafter and sighing etched Victorian angels with the eyes blacked out and tits drawn in – the nature of said descriptions all chosen to magnify and reflect what The Caress considered themselves to be. Which was sexy and anarchic and dangerous and vengeful individuals who had the collective scent of fresh patchouli. Who started out as idealistic and gentle toddlers, brightly colored cylinders of Play-doh that were pounded into strange shapes. (With the exception of Judy Lu, who was just sort of colorless, even as the undead go.)

In the main room, where the sofa and television and set of encyclopedias might go, were vampires strewn languid over the floor like children at nap-time in kindergarten, atop bare foam cushions and soiled sheets and dirty castaway futons. They ranged in age from 14-24, the terminal ages at which they were turned, frozen in time like photographs in old high-school yearbooks that have long since stopped being relevant to any such individuals who existed now in reality. They were pale shades of peach, brown, and yellow, almost pastel in hue, some locked in each others arms in a twist of limbs, some gazing passively into the ceiling, some nervous and wrinkled and waiting to refuel, all bound in the common goal that brought The Caress together, the same one that brought ants and packs of wolves together, the desire for continued survival through sufficient nourishment, and the instinctual knowledge that their numbers significantly increased their survival – and that the selective thinning of their species would reduce the demand and make their supply more of a bounty.

Not that they consciously regarded their situation in such concrete terms, certainly not, they expressed their philosophy mutely in the same way that bees built hives.

*** **

There were no pieces of furniture proper in the apartment but the easy chair draped in a piss-colored psychedelic-print bed sheet that Rache sat in as

she looked out the narrow spaces between the boards that sealed up the window. Her arms were thick and powerful; she was barely 5'2" and somewhat pudgy, but the way she carried herself, the bang the door made when she slammed it open or closed, the healthy pink *smack* of her palm across Judy's face when she fucked up – one got the feeling it was a bulk comprised disproportionately of muscle. Her wavy hair was tomato-red, and plentiful, and she wore it loose that day and it flowed like a river of blood down her shoulders, down beyond full breasts that were squeezed up under her chin with a black boned corset embellished in red bugle beads and crimson lace. On her legs were a pair of black leather pants that were held fast to her body with zippers that ran the full length of each leg; a pair of red Doc Martens extended to just below her knee, fastened by an assortment of buckles and straps that were reminiscent of the back of a straightjacket, and the metal cleats that protruded from its bottoms, and made a metallic tapping sound like fleet of nails when she walked, were her own design. On her fingers, all of her fingers, were rings as big as bottle caps with glass eyeballs and daggers and skulls on them, and kissing the cleft where her breasts met was a large silver pendant of a howling wolf.

Also around her neck, pulled up tight against her throat like a choker, was a dark brown, almost black sachet, accented with gold glitter, stuffed with a wad of herbs and dried secretions.

Rache's face was as tight and seething as a D-cup constricted in a shirt five sizes too small. She didn't look up when Judy entered, but she knew it was her.

"Rache, did you hear about Xuchera?"

Rache ran a finger idly over the edge of one of the boards.

"She was stupid," she said, playing with a splinter, rocking it back-and-forth until it broke off. "She took our Gift and turned it into some sad, whoring sideshow."

Judy couldn't think of anything to say, because she couldn't think.

Rache continued, her gaze still fixed on the spaces between the boards. Her voice was flush with resentment that steadily built until her teeth hardly

moved when she spoke, like a growl.

“When she first turned, I *tried* to be friends with her, I *tried* to extend a friendly hand – but she just thought she was *so much better* than me, so I said, ‘fuck it,’ you know? Who needs that bullshit, Xuchera and that big stick up her ass? Then The Caress started up, I saw she was going it alone – I tried to bring her in, but she didn’t appreciate it. She thought we were just a bunch of weirdoes, a bunch of children, and she was soooo above us – I could see that in her eyes. She wanted to be like Gennera, but she just didn’t *cut* it, did she? She wanted to be like veal...”

“Veal” was a vampire term for people like you and me--assuming you’re not a vampire, of course.

“–but I was like ‘hey bitch, you’re a vampire!’ Stupid bitch. Well, where is she *now*, huh?”

There was silence, as Judy didn’t realize that this was not a rhetorical question.

“Judy! Are you listening to me?! *Where is she now?!*”

“She’s dead now,” Judy stated in a monotone.

“Yep. Stupid bitch.” Rache rapped the boards with her knuckles. “Stupid bitch. Good. We don’t need stupid, lost bitches like that in The Caress. In fact, we don’t need them in the whole fucking species.”

Silence. Then,

“I would have done it myself, if that stupid bitch carried on any longer.”

In Anne Rice novels – which would-be vampires took very seriously until they actually became vampires and discovered to their surprise that they couldn’t move their bowels anymore – there was a vampire law that dictated that a vampire was not to kill another vampire. Rache, who was quite the groupie of the undead in her youth, was fully aware of this dictum, and even considered it very noble. But now, after so many years of experience, Rache was sure that if Ms. Rice was acquainted with some of the assholes she had the misfortune to be aquatinted with, she would revise that particular rule.

To be fair, Ms. Rice did have a clause about those vampires who were

sick, old, and generally disgusting. But Rache wasn't as concerned with such infirmities as she was with those she deemed, simply, "assholes."

Bitches.

Lost.

Little lost lambs.

Boo hoo.

*** **

Rache took a field-trip to Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and ignored the incredible heat that surged from the metal door and boiled her hands through the insulated gloves she wore. She expected a certain degree of discomfort when entering a church, and took it in stride. Her brain told her that the whole thing about crosses being a powerful deterrent to vampires was culturally-instilled, not an actual biological fact. Ms. Rice concurred with Rache on this point. But Rache went through many years of Catholic school, and something stuck and now religious items made her sweat and burn to the touch, and she had an awareness deep in her belly that she was a sworn enemy of Christ. And all that. Well.

Rache, being quite awake and aware of the significance of symbols, specifically chose the door with the bas-relief of the heart on it, and the heart bore three swords through its meat.

She had a messenger bag slung across her chest, and in this bag was a jar.

And she walked past the white votive candles and information desk and headed straight for the brown keg that had a handwritten sign taped onto it.

And the sign said,

HOLY WATER

And she quickly filled the jar, wincing in pain every now and then at a stray droplet of the fluid that bounced off the jar and onto her face or arm or hand, sizzling on contact, eating through protective layers of leather and fleece and

skin.

*** **

An unusually large woman clad in denim stepped into Mr. Kim's candy store and purchased three different newspapers, the latest Cosmopolitan, and an entire case of Skittles, which Kim ordered special for her. When she first started frequenting the store, he was a bit apprehensive at the sight of the 6'2", 250-lb raven-haired titan, not only because of her appearance but for the strange, lingering fashion in which she perused the wares; how she turned packages of cookies and bottles of dishwashing detergent around in her hands in fascination, reading the labels. Mrs. Kim felt that she might be a drug addict of some sort, but there was a clarity about the woman's eyes and voice that rang like glass.

Her name was Marta, and she chatted with Mr. Kim for a while before rolling up the reading material and tucking it under one arm, easily hefting up the Skittles case onto the shoulder of her other arm, and heading out the door to her one-bedroom out on Christopher.

Indeed, Marta had experienced an epiphany of sorts several years ago, and now she couldn't get enough of the world, of the small things that were always in front of her but had about as much meaning to her life as a brick in a Libyan mosque.

She had become a voracious reader of daily newspapers and viewer of television news. Her favorite types of entertainment were reality-based, such as talk shows, documentaries, and biographies; Marta had a keen worship for the ordinary life, the human life. And she contributed to that life in small ways, by having her evening talk with Mr. Kim, by participating in the neighborhood watch, preventing a robbery here, a harassment there. By talking to others like herself and trying to convince them that they didn't have to prowl the streets, that there was a better way and she was there to support them through that transition.

Marta had become radiant. Beatific. Passing by her on the way to your apartment, returning the bell of her hello, you would never think that only years

ago she was one of the most prolific murderers in vampire history, with thousands of victims to her credit.

She put the case of Skittles on the table, ripped the top off carefully, and opened a single package. She removed a single Skittle and popped it into her mouth. She sucked on it for a while, until the sweet juice from the coating was gone, and then spit the naked candy out into her hand. She would do this with all the candies in the box, just for the flavor, because vampires don't eat.

Her freezer was stocked with cats, which might seem sort of gross to you, but better them than us, eh?

*** **

Marta had settled down to watching a one o'clock repeat showing of The Jenny Jones Show when the doorbell rang. She called out to the visitor that she would be right there, then lifted her huge frame out of the couch and opened the door. She didn't consider an unexpected late-night visitor something to be feared--mainly because she was bigger and stronger than probably anybody who would arrive. She didn't even look through the peephole, she just undid the single lock on her door and was suddenly face-to-face with Rache.

Rache tried to play it cool, but her face blushed at the sight of the woman who had "turned" her. They had been inseparable for two years, and in that time had many special moments and many great kills. It didn't help that Marta's face melted at the sight of her, that her muscular arms engulfed her in an embrace and Rache's nostrils were bombarded with the smell of her body that triggered off even more memories, made her want to bury her head between her legs and just die there, coming home, coming home...

"I missed you so much, Rache!"

Rache could feel the warmth of Marta's face, hear Marta snuffle back tears at the sight of her, breathe in the intoxication that was Marta, homecoming, homecoming, homecoming...

But Rache had a gift for *remembering*. Everything. Every single thing that

had happened in her life, complete with who, what, where and the exact date. She was particularly good at recalling slights, injuries, disasters--and recalling them in such vivid detail that her mind would play tricks on her and replay the incident in a virtual reality that would trigger. That would stiffen. That would seethe and quake and roar out of her. But she would not be the beast. She would be controlled. She let the memories trick her mind but in a slow, seeping way, fleshing out the hollow of her chest.

Rache regained composure and gently extricated herself from Marta's arms. Marta thought nothing of it; she knew that due to her size her hugs could be suffocating without meaning to. She took the opportunity to see past Rache and take note of the other two vampires who accompanied her. One was Judy Lu, who Marta remembered vaguely. The other was a young man with a bald head and a ripped Gumby T-shirt that she did not know. Rache made no motion to introduce them, but headed for the couch, and put her bag down next to her.

Marta was tempted to sit near Rache, but opted for the adjacent chair; she realized this was probably uncomfortable for her. Marta's epiphany had made opening up to others very simple, because she was clear and open now. But Rache was still "in the life." Rache was still hurting, and hurting other people. But maybe Marta could help her.

Silence.

In the background, Judy and the other man were milling about like phantoms.

Rache spoke.

"You heard about Xuchera?"

"Who...was Xuchera again?"

"You remember *Xuchera*, don't you? Tall, blond..."

Marta shook her head apologetically.

"Doesn't ring a bell."

Rache's back twitched and she lurched forward slightly from the sofa.

"Xooo-kera. Remember? You turned her. She wanted the Gift, and you didn't seem too reluctant to give it to her..."

Marta swallowed deep in shame; it was hard to be the recipient of an epiphany and face your own sins at the same time. Unlike opening yourself up to the world, that situation never got any easier. But Mary told her that she would have to do just that, over and over again, and Marta accepted it. There was nothing to do but acknowledge it directly.

“Yes...there were *many*. I don’t remember all the names.”

Rache’s mind started to dance.

“Anyway, Xuchera was destroyed. They think a Hunter did it. Stakes were found. Sad, huh?”

“That’s unfortunate...it’s a dangerous life.”

“Yeah. Poor little lamb...So. I heard you don’t have veal anymore. True?”

“Yeah...I found there was a better way.”

“What happened? Find Jesus?”

“Close...”

And so Marta enthusiastically told Rache about the apparition of the Virgin Mary that had suddenly visited her one night. She had been out stalking a woman who was coming home from classes at NYU when it happened. This bright lady came out of nowhere, just materialized in front of her, and told her not to kill the woman. She had long, flowing brown hair and a serene face with rosy cheeks and a white robe, and she gave off illumination from deep within her. And she said she was Mary, and she said she didn’t want Marta to hunt anymore.

“I know that sounds kind of incredible, but that’s what happened. And ever since then—“

Rache sneered.

“—you’ve been sucking cats dry. Right?”

“Yes. It’s better that way.”

“I remember when we used to suck cats, when we had the deep hungers and there wasn’t enough veal to go around...how we used to keep them in the attic...”

Marta nodded.

Rache shifted her body, stretched out an arm across the top of a cushion.

“I think feeding off animals is like eating out of your own asshole.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Rache...”

This wasn’t going well. Marta felt bad. Marta wanted to make things better. Silence, but for the slow shuffle of Judy and the bald man’s feet.

Marta felt she had to take the chance, she had to reach out now or Rache would never have a prayer of being Saved. She leaned over and tried to take her hand.

“Rache...I have a good life now. It’s stable. I’m used to the food, it isn’t that much different once you get into a routine. I’m happy. I’m not hungering all the time, I’m not angry. It’s wonderful. I can help you. You can stay here. We could start over, build a life together. You’ve always been very very dear to me.”

The little red-haired vampire pulled away in disgust.

“Yeah, so dear that you fucked every open hole within a ten-mile radius.”

“I’m sorry. I was a different person then.”

“Yeah, that’s great...we all *turn*, don’t we?”

And with that the bald man brought down one of the frozen cats upon Marta’s skull; she shakily turned around to greet the same cat smashing her in the face. Then the cat smashed her again in the skull, a stream of black bile shooting out of her crushed nose. Her spine twisted, and her large body fell face-first over onto the glass coffee table and smashed it to pieces.

Rache stood over her motionless body. She picked up a lead ashtray and threw it on her back, where it landed with a dull thud.

Rache’s eyes flashed fireworks:

“*Sorrr-ee! Sorrysorr-sorrr-eeeeee!*”

Rache turned back at the robotic faces of Judy and the bald man. She let out a high-pitched giggle.

“An elephant...never forgets! An elephant never forgets! What does an elephant never *neeeeeever* do? *Judy?*”

“Forget,” she said blankly.

*** **

Marta woke up. She was chained to a kitchen chair. Her face was swollen and black, her nose was broken, but she suffered less disfigurement than a veal would have had under the same circumstances.

Her puffy eyes regarded Rache, who stood before her holding a jar filled with a clear liquid.

“Do you know what this is, Marta?”

No...don't say it. I might survive it if I didn't know...

“*Grade-A 100-percent pure unadulterated Holy Water*, consecrated by Cardinal O'Connor himself! Bottoms up!”

The apparition told her that this day would come. She warned her that this would happen, the inevitability of it. She just thought she'd have a little more time, that's all.

Judy came up from behind Marta and pinched her nose shut. The bald man shoved two wooden spoons in her mouth and pried it open. Rache poured. Rache had nothing more to say. Her mind was dancing. She was carrying out the inevitable, the love-lovely revenge.

The fallen vampire shrieked in pain at the touch of the water, which burned her mouth like acid. Rache kept pouring until it was all done, then clamped her mouth tightly shut with her hands.

The water boiled up Marta's esophagus, trying desperately to escape through vomit out of the blocked passageway. Rache hissed through her teeth in pleasure, even as the bits of regurgitated water leaked on her hands, burning them raw.

Marta's neck swelled up like a frog's. Her giant body swayed the chair, first to the left, then to the right, the wooden frame threatening to snap under the strain, threatening to tip over. Rache straddled Marta's body and focused all her strength on her clamped hands, ignoring the burn and the pop of her pale, undead skin, as Judy and the bald man did their best to hold the chair steady.

Then Marta's neck burst open. Rache jumped to the side as holy water, blood, and the cakey filth that builds idle in a vampire's body cascaded out over

the amazon's body, incinerating her clothes, searing off her breasts, melting away the super-epoxy that held the flesh of her abdomen shut, bowels spilling onto her lap.

Rache stared at the sizzling, mutilated body of the woman who first turned her, who first fucked her, the sensual lips gone that brought her more pleasure than she ever thought was possible to feel.

And every last drop of sentiment drained out of Rache's body like the final dregs of a flu.

She fingered the sachet the witch had given her several years ago. It was going to be true.

She turned and faced Judy, and gave her a calm, firm look. That look assured Judy that if she displeased her, the same would happen to her.

*** **

Mr. Kim was the one who finally called the police. He regretted that the investigation turned into such a circus, what with the discovery of the cats and all.

IV.

Mia went to the corner store and bought Frank a bottle of Coke, because she knew that he liked to drink one after sex.

But he was very tired when he got home, because he worked very hard.

"My brave cowboy," Mia thought to herself, and went to bed.

Two days later, Mia went to Waldbaums because they had a sale on chicken. She bought a lot of chicken, and they came out to about 19 cents a piece. She would freeze them and they would have enough chicken to last them well into the winter. Mia found that sort of romantic; she pictured living in the country, Frank bringing home wild game to be savored when the world was too

snowy to venture outside.

While she was at Waldbaums, Mia picked up another bottle of Coke.

Frank had to work overtime that day, and he didn't get home until very late. Mia had fallen asleep by then, because the tranquilizers she took to calm her anxiety kicked in.

Frank didn't have time to eat the broiled chicken Mia had cooked, but took some to work with him the next day. At lunch, Billy Rooke raved over the chicken Frank shared with him; Billy had no steady woman at the moment, and thus had to cook his own food or order out.

"What about frozen dinners," Frank asked as he discretely sucked out a bit of marrow.

"Nah, they're so frickin' *small*. You gotta eat *two* of them."

Frank's chicken was tender and golden, its surface embellished with fine seasonings. But the flavor went down layer after layer, to the bones; Mia always made sure to soak her meat in a fine marinade.

Frank thought to himself,

"This is really good chicken,"

and told her so when he came home.

"I'm glad you like it. There's much more where that came from."

And Mia opened up the Frigidaire and showed Frank the frozen chicken.

Frank felt a flush of pride in his chest.

He was a very happy man. He felt very lucky.

Mia was so sweet to him.

He took her in his arms, brushed the brown hair away from her face.

"Horny?" he asked.

*** **

Frank was tired, she could tell, though he made a gallant effort. There were just certain subtle signals during love-making that he would send, and when she picked up on those signals, that's when she just gave him a thorough bow-

job until he came. Then they went to sleep.

*** **

Giving blow-jobs turned Mia on just about more than anything else she could do with a man. It gave her such a flush of pride to see how happy she made Frank when she successfully blew him.

Mia woke up at 2 in the morning and realized something and had trouble getting back to sleep. She forgot to offer him a Coke.

Mia couldn't get back to sleep. She didn't want to take any tranquilizers tonight because she didn't want her body to grow dependent on them. So she stared at Frank's slumbering body. She liked the way he looked like a vulnerable little boy when he slept, even though in reality he was big and strong and tough. She thought about how hard he worked, how he put himself in danger every day with no thought of his own safety. She thought about how safe she felt around him. She thought about how this man inspired feelings of domesticity in her that she never thought she was capable of. She was so grateful.

She pressed her back against his chest and put his arm around her. She watched the sun go up, and though she had watched it come up many time, it sort of made her sad this time.

Frank called Thursday night and told Mia he would be late and not to wait up. He promised the boys at the precinct that he would join them for darts after work. She told him that it was okay. She was making chicken soup; should she leave some out on the stove for when he got back? He told her to leave it in the fridge, so it wouldn't spoil. She said okay. When she got off the phone, she went into the kitchen to start cooking and opened up the refrigerator.

Next to the bowl of thawed-out chicken parts were three bottles of Coke. When Mia saw them, she started to cry hysterically and crumpled to the floor.

*** **

Mia submerged her hands into the smoke-colored dishwater, reaching for the particularly eggy frying pan that would need a good scrubbing, even with a 15-minute soak. It would have been easier to use steel-wool on such a project, but she opted stubbornly for the rag, rubbing it vigorously, mechanically, over the offending yellow bits that were seemingly fused onto the metal.

She was restless and hyper, and her only salvation in such times was to clean relentlessly with the most archaic and basic tools she could find. A washcloth in a bucket of soapy water: rubbing, rubbing, rubbing it, wringing it, deluging it.

Exhausted from a job she hated, but not exhausted enough to bring upon sleep when the only sterling stone in her life was still out, doing what—

—darts.

No, he hates me, I didn't do enough and now he's—

—no, paranoid thoughts again, don't have them, you know your veil is very thin and your thoughts unreliable.

Clean, a clean house, clean tiles, shiny frying pan, not a speck of the black—

—tranquilizers.

No, you'll get dependent on them and a mate mustn't be a lush or an addict but a woman unlike any other, a healthy helpmeet without baggage...

Continue to clean, gingerly scoop out the drain with your hand and empty its foul contents into the trash bin—

—now, rinse the sink, disinfect the sink, rinse it again, rinse it again—

—didn't you keep yourself beautiful, didn't you rise an extra half-an-hour in the morning so he would never see you in your morning-face, morning stench, always clean and combed and always careful in speech?

—My brave cowboy.

—disinfect the counter, consider harshly the contents of your refrigerator and then purge it. Trash, take it out to the cans, don't let it sit another day.

—am I not attractive?

—don't take yourself so seriously. Don't take these thoughts seriously.

–everything’s fine.
–the floors. First sweep, every corner, into the pan, into the bin--
–now, get the mop, rinse the mop, dip it into the water, run it across the surface–

Yellow wood turning to a golden color as it wets.

*** **

Pick it up, pick it up, every hair, every pin, into the bin, into the bin--
–*I’ve always tried to be good*–
–shut-up. Bad thoughts again, bad thoughts,
–the little oval label of a banana stuck to the floor, scrape it off, scrape it off–

–a hard black formation, what is it, gum? Old gum?
–*am I attractive?*
–scrape it off, scrape it off, stop being paranoid, stop thinking shitty thoughts, blocking up your mind, nobody wants to be around a downer–
–a woman unlike any other–
–the dirty grey corner of a piece of paper, sticking up from between two floor boards, small triangle but not beneath the notice of an award-winning cleaner this night–

–*I see it, I see it, it doesn’t belong here*–
–clean floor, can’t ignore it–
–pull it, get on your knees and pull it–
–out–

A piece of paper, rolled tight like a joint and stashed in a hollowed-out seam in the floor. Typed, both sides, the small, irregular font of an obsolete manual typewriter.

Typed, both sides, the small irregular–
–font–

Why can’t she read it, why is this paper impenetrable like a slab of frosted

glass—

Read it, stupid—

—bitch—

*** **

Dear My Bright Sun,

My God, has it really been a full two weeks since the last time we set eyes upon each other? Every moment I'm away from you makes my soul ache. You were the sun that shined in my sky--now I am in darkness. Oh, I'm sure you are laughing at me, at my antiquated prose, and believe me not. But do believe me, every word, no matter how fantastic to your ears, for I never lie. If you were not indeed the very sun that rose and set upon my window, I would tell you, I would not be sitting at my typewriter, composing these copious missives. Every word I write is straight from my heart, little pieces of my heart, and it is excruciating to write them because I am not with you. Please find time to see me soon, for I am dying here away from you. I desire your touch once again. "Cock," "fuck," such ugly words, I hope you do not lose respect for me for having used them, but they had rightly conveyed the power and mood of the situation that they described.

Oh, how can you stand such a randy, silly wretch like myself? Me, from the ivy-strewn halls of academe, my Gothic ways and ancient, peculiar tastes--and you, from the world of the suburbs and conformity. Star-crossed, you might say--certainly not a coincidence. I feel as if I had known you all my life, never to recall a time when you weren't my Sun. I'm counting the minutes until you return--my immortal beloved.

Please find a way we can be together soon again. Take pity on this foolish, whimsical heart of mine.

Until then,

Your Sweet Angel-Nipples.

PS: Please do hurry, I am exploding with unexpressed sexiness!

*** **

It dawned on Rache several days after the killing of her ex-lover Marta that she had indeed killed her ex-lover Marta. It was not so long after the filth from Marta's insides were scrubbed off from the toes of Rache's Doc Martens, or the small red-haired vampire's palms were wrapped with black electrical tape to cover the scaldings from the holy water – but long enough for the emotional anesthesia that is rage and successful revenge to fade away and in its place come regret.

A balding, tan, mustachioed stock broker who had been lured by one of the prettier girls with promises of a cheap bj was lying in the center of the Clan Caress communal unlivingroom, his chest and jugular ripped open by scores of pointy canines. Watching him lie there, his body ravaged and exposed and starting to bloat, it reminded Rache of those Jiffy Pops she had as a kid, and that started her down the road of sentiment that she was sure she'd eradicated with the murder of her Mistress.

A sudden fear gripped her: *she was all alone!*

Of course she wasn't really alone – she had her *childer*. But they were just minions – slaves. These slaves on their hands and knees before the body of this finely-groomed, affluent middle-aged man, this symbol of everything that Rache hated – how they smacked their jaws contentedly at the taste of that banal claret! No sense of style! They would eat anything, ignorant of the romantic aspect of the Hunt which was their birthright. How many of the vampires tearing this veal

apart were savoring the irony, dreaming and dreaming and orgasming over the day when they would rule and march and stomp all over the world of the Sunlight?

Judy Lu, face befouled with fresh and drying blood, chewed complacently on a piece of the man's heart; she looked up at Rache just as an afterthought, then remembered her place as her childe and held up the chunk of tubey flesh as casually as if she was offering a stick of gum.

Rache waved her away in annoyance, then walked up to a wall and studied the pictures that adorned it. What were they all...rock stars made up to look like the Undead? Models made up to look like the Undead? Actors and actresses in pancake makeup and dime-store fangs made up to look like the Undead? Rache tapped a stubby, ringed finger at the faded image of a young man with spiky black hair and ice-white skin resting against a pillar in a fake cemetery, head thrown back in angst just like St Sebastian – Mr. Robby Sullivan, star of “The Sweet Hereafter.” They made him up like the Undead and the unlucky bastard really died–gutted in the chest with a butcher-knife.

“Now *that's* class,” she said to herself. And the head of The Caress, the self-styled Queen of the Vampires (though Elizabeth Baxter, head of Clan Gennera, might have disputed that, had she thought it was worth lowering herself to address such haemowhores and losers) was alone with her memories and her ideals of how the world should be. And the only person in this world who could have appreciated those memories and ideals was dead.

Rache bit her lower lip, piercing it with her left fang and sending a thin trickle of somebody else's blood down her chin. She killed Marta. That was a bit shortsighted. I mean, she was kind of ruined wit the whole self-righteous “epiphany” crap – worse than a fucking TV evangelist with that shit. But there was still hope. He could have pretended to see things her way and in the process slowly corrupt her. To take one back from the angels would have been a yummy deed that the old Marta certainly would have appreciated. But now there was no hope. And Rache was completely alone.

“FUCK!!!!!!” she suddenly screamed, pounding both of her taped fists into

the wall, into the picture of Rob Sullivan, into the clippings and posters of fake vampires. She savagely turned around and regarded her *childer*, who hadn't even paused their feeding orgy in response to her outburst, just kept champing their fangs and pulling threads of meat out of the corpse. Rache ran up to the human's shell and kicked it in her *childer's* faces.

"Got your attention *now*, huh? *You fucking insects!* Get this fucking thing out of here! Get this fucking obscene thing out now before I flatten your fucking useless skulls!"

The panicked vampires turned to Rache and then to each other dumbly, scrambling shambling legs and feet. They didn't even stop to wipe some of the carnage that fell out of the stockbroker's gutted body onto their chests and faces – they simply heard the voice of their Mistress and obeyed. Which is how it should be. Which was why Rache was alone.

"That's right," Rache continued to yell, "get that shit out of here! Now!"

The short red-haired vampire, her face flush black with anger, took her "throne" and placed a death-grip upon the armrests with each hand. Her thoughts were confused, feral, white with rage; she didn't like it, didn't like letting go without a context to enjoy it in. What, beat up her own minions, perhaps rip off a limb here or there, some random mutilation? Torture Judy, beat her with a belt, force her to give some oral – bitch *loved* that shit! Where was the romance, where was the *class* in that? Marta was the last of them...the last of the Aware...the last good friend she'd ever have...

The body was gone, leaving a large, dark protein-rich pool in its wake. Judy, her thin, bloodstained arms slack at her sides, spoke to her Mistress.

"You want us to clean that?"

Rache crossed her legs and flashed her childe a contemptuous, nasty, fang-tipped smile.

"I want you to EAT it."

Rache stifled a cry in her chubby hand as Judy calmly knelt beside the crimson puddle, dipped a tan hand in, and put the thick dripping mess to her mouth

*** **

Myra Banes was an unnaturally thin young woman in her early 20s with two sweet little brown close-set eyes, one long nose (slightly crooked to the left), and two little sacks of mammaries that earned her from Frank the title “Sweet Angel-Nipples.” With the money her parents sent her for food & textbooks she imported Goth clothing from Japan, and on this particular night she was wearing a black satin ruffled Victorian blouse with 9-inch weeper cuffs, a French maid’s skirt with a blood-red cross embroidered on it, black-and-red striped stockings, and patent-leather Mary Janes with huge silver buckles and thick clog soles. Long black hair with dirty-blond roots fell in curling-iron made ringlets, framing her pale, powdered face; her lips were thin and drawn in a deep scarlet. She might have been pursuing her degree in English Literature at an urban college in Brooklyn, but at heart she was a Gothic Lolita strolling along mournfully with her coffin-purse and lace parasol in a Tim Burton Neverneverland somewhere between the Villa Diodati and Tokyo.

Myra considered herself to be one of the world’s last great Romantics, the type that would give scented poetry to a lover or throw herself from a cliff in despair over lost love. If such Romanticism wasn’t blended with a hearty smacking of *sang*, she might have made a good greeting-card writer, or a devotee of Lifetime television movies. But as things were, Myra was a Freak, freak with a capital F, not Freak as in Tod Browning’s *Freaks* but Freak as in those the freaks fear.

Myra jonesed for blood.

In her unpublished autobiography, “My Black Black Velvet Heart,” Myra speculated on the origins of such an unusual fetish:

“When I was seven years old, I fell off the monkeybars and broke my front teeth in. Brilliant red blood flowed into my mouth, and I had no choice but to drink it, drink

it down, drink every last drop. There was no disputing the tastiness of it--but it was a singular flavor that I had been completely eradicated with the waters of Lethe until I started Junior High--at which time and place I adopted the garb and musical tastes of what you would call The Goth, though it was completely an unaffectedness on my part. In one of my past lives I was a courtesan to Vlad Tepes, so it was just going home again, so to speak.."

Myra Banes, Treasurer of the Bram Stoker Society of Flatbush, Webmistress of the Louis/Claudia Shippers Fanfiction Archive website, proud owner of a pair of porcelain fangs that she keeps in a jar by the door – Myra thought blood ingestion was romantic, saw it as just the swapping of sexual fluids only one step further. Though she never had said experience, especially not with Frank, who was as vanilla as God created, so vanilla even the black vanilla seeds were removed, so vanilla all the original vanilla was removed because it was too tangy.

No, this was a fantasy that had existed primarily within the confines of Myra's rather busy brain. And in this fantasy, Lestat's exquisite raping of Louis's neck, as portrayed by the improbably blond Tom Cruise and the luxuriously-tressed Brad Pitt, was the ultimate romantic act, the real phenomenon that set Myra's clit-a-burstin' with unexpressed sexiness. This bit was the ultimate act of love, the seal.

–and without love, aren't we just animals roaming upon a cold, unblinking planet in a dead solar system?

The doorbell rang.

Frank.

And how does Frank exist in your mind's eye, Myra? What does he look like, what does he stand for, what future do you envision with each other? And what does he see when he looks at you, what childhood neuroses did your bearing and personality and appearance trip off in his mind?

*** **

By the time Judy had just about finished drinking up the unmentionable puddle of blood, vital juices, and possibly excrement & piss that their recent guest the stockbroker left in his wake, Rache had hit upon a most brilliant idea that would undoubtedly put the zip back into her life and make everything okay again. She would contact her old classmate Mia Tomblin and they would resume their friendship and hang out all the time. They would go to bars, malls, movies, the San Gennaro Festival. They would conduct long philosophical discussions and make homemade jewelry. They would rebuild The Caress, kill enemies, burn down churches. *Mia Tomblin, Mia Tomblin*...yes, Rache remembered Mia Tomblin, constructed the ghost of Mia, pictured just exactly how she would look when she was turned.

How exactly did they lose touch, anyway?, Rache wondered as Judy spread her legs to give her head. They were the best of friends, two mavericks in a Catholic boarding school filled with automatons and breeders. What she remembered of Mia was her intelligence, her creativity, her strength, her will, her courage--she was going to destroy the establishment, break balls, rattle minds, and all through words...Mia was going to write a novel that slit the throat of her tormentors & subverted the Establishment all at the same time. Actually, Rache was kind of surprised she hadn't yet heard of Mia's name in the press...and also kind of glad, because her former friend's notoriety would only make her jealous and want to kill her.

Mia thought she was sooooo special, didn't she?

Mia wasn't famous.

Mia was famous.

Mia wasn't famous and she was just waiting all these years to have Rache come back into her life to give it meaning.

Mia wasn't happy.

Mia was happy. Some punk-bitch husband had taken her place. She'd kill him and fuck her and suck her dry and toss her into a ditch.

Mia wasn't happy. Mia was waiting all these years for Rache to come back and turn her life around and give it meaning.

They'd *rule*.

They'd kill Judy, kill the rest of the Clan, burn the fucking apartment building to the ground, move to Paris, take over.

Mia and Judy would both be her slaves.

Mia would be the primary *childe*, followed by Judy.

Mia and Judy would pleasure her at the same time.

On Rache's birthday, Mia and Judy would get together and plan a secret surprise party. Later, they would all go to the mall.

Yes.

Time to register on Classmates.com.

Rache looked down at Judy's bobbing head; she had been so wrapped up in her mania that she had forgot that there was a cold tongue covered with borrowed gore flicking her hole. What a waste. Anyway...

"Judy? You can stop now."

Judy stopped without a word and looked up at her Mistress with mute eyes.

"Judy, I need a computer with internet access. Go kill somebody with a computer."

*** **

Frank embraced Myra and gave her a lusty kiss scented with Clorets, the silk and crepe of her outfit rubbing against the blue cotton & polyester of his uniform. Myra loved the idea that they were both in costume.

Myra's small room was painted in a deep, rich red that perfectly matched

the hue of her lipstick, a red that teetered dangerously close to a black or brown. Tacked neatly to her walls were a series of postcards with Gothic & vampire themes: *Interview With The Vampire*, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Nightmare Before Christmas*, Siouxsie Sioux, The Cure, Rasputina, Bela Lugosi; each card carefully mounted with 3M Removable Mounting Squares, perfectly equidistant from each other. A black netting hung like a tapestry on the wall behind her modest full-size futon; the bedding was large enough to fuck on but couldn't accommodate two sleeping bodies, which was just fine for Frank's purposes.

The glow that vibrated the spines of the reunited lovers started to fade as soon as the clothes are doffed, at least for Myra – all the mental masturbation that had been building inside her twiggy frame for the last week in anticipation for her Bright Sun's return made the immediate task at hand pale in comparison, real fucking with a penis and everything. So as Frank's face squirmed over her Lilliputian breasts Myra psyched and re-psyched herself, inventing ever-Gothic, ever-angsty scenarios to make the slap of sweaty flesh upon flesh palatable.

"Bite my nipples! Oh, yeah! Frank! Frank!"

After a perfunctory blow-job that Frank seemed to receive quite well--going so far as to perform a mini-skullfuck upon the young woman that sent him into his own private Xanadu of sensations and plots and ancient memories--Myra noted with minor annoyance that he didn't come, which meant that they would have to perform the fucking. And she had her paper for "The Supernatural in 19th Century Literature" due in only a week! She began to compose the essay silently in her mind as Frank anxiously ripped the condom she provided him out of its foil wrapper, his body swarthy, toned, but rather hairless.

"After reading *Dracula*, I had to conclude that Bram Stoker grievously set Lucy Westenra up. I was presented with only brief letters and snippets from journal entries with which to assemble a portrait of her, but they sufficed."

"I'm going to fuck you until your head explodes," Frank promised, getting

into position. Myra's thin lips met his full ones and their tongues wrestled.

"I had my cues, my clues. She was marked as vampire fodder. In some strange logic she deserved her fate as demon and corpse."

After a few near-misses Frank managed to plunge his golden cock deep into Myra's well-groomed snatch.

"Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Dear Lord!" Frank lamented, as Myra's vaginal muscles squeezed his penis.

"Frank! Don't stop! I'll die if you stop!! I'll die!!!"

"To 'deserve it' is to have displayed some negative character trait during the story, no matter how subtle or how seemingly harmless. With female characters this character trait is almost always sexual awareness, sexual aggression, and unhappiness with some aspect of the classic female 'role'."

Myra's tits wiggled violently on her chest like bubbles steaming off a pot of boiling water, Frank past the point of fondling or tweaking her tiny hard nipples, Frank too busy driving into Myra for his own dear life.

Myra jerked her head back and wailed to the gods,

"It's too much! Too much pleasure!!! Godddddd!!!"

"According to Kathleen L. Spencer in her article 'Purity and Danger: Dracula, the Urban Gothic, and the Late Victorian Degeneracy Crisis,' Lucy belongs to the class Victorians would find least sacrificeable rather than most--a young, beautiful, virtuous girl'."

Frank pulled his cock out of her right before he ejaculated, spraying his fluid atop Myra's soft belly and breasts while she lied beatific and enraptured before him.

"Yesss!! Spill it! All that wonderful stuff!! Oh, yesss!!!"

"But with such a high status comes high expectations. When one is on top and is an example of the ideal of one's

people, a higher penalty is paid for the transgression."

Frank rested upon her chest, a big man but not big enough to make her uncomfortable by the weight; his back was slick with sweat and the semen he had just produced was sandwiched between the two bodies like jam. He huffed in the air, spent, exhausted, but a job well-done.

Myra kissed him, her lipstick worn off, and smiled as if she had just won the lottery.

"That was great, my love," she said breathily.

"Do you feel like I...fucked your brains out?"

"So any discordant note Lucy strikes with her contemporaries or the reader, no matter how tinkling and trivial, will be cast in her face tenfold."

The name of Myra's paper was, "Lucy Wanted It."

*** **

At 9:30 in the evening Mia Magdalen Cefalu decided to fire up the Dirt Devil and clean under those pesky sofa cushions. Rolled out on the kitchen table, held flat by two tomatoes, a lemon, and a bushel of garlic, was the note Myra had sent (given? the touch of bare hand against bare hand? contagion?) Frank, who was Mia's husband. On the 32-inch television set CNN blasted at full-volume, reporting about some sort of explosive device that killed several people in a country we don't care about, a place where life is cheap and this sort of thing happens all the time say no more. Back in the bedroom the lights were off but the 19-inch was on, playing *Monty Python's Flying Circus* on an obscure Long Island public station; something about a parrot.

A quick succession of images flashed through Mia's mind on a loop, superimposed on her inner monologue regarding the necessity of vacuuming under the sofa cushions at least once a week in order to maintain proper sofa hygiene: confronting Frank, cutting her throat out with the lid of an opened metal

can, and the possibility of a perfectly reasonable explanation. With a flash of insight that one might dare say was even on the level of psychic, Mia decided to unzip the cushion-cases, whereby several tightly-rolled letters fell out like a teenager's stash of grass. As she read the love-poetry, the purple prose, the declarations of undying amour and the explicit play-by-plays of intimate encounters and the occasional skull-fuck, Mia decided to wax the floors, call her mother, go back to college for a degree in accounting, slit her throat, confront Frank, start defrosting the chicken for tomorrow, and replace the oilcloth in the shelves. A trip to Hawaii, a Xanax cocktail, another chapter in Nora Roberts, the millennium ball.

The phone rang, and she hated the phone ringing, she cranked the Dirt Devil another notch and tried to lose herself in it, wandering disoriented through her own house, the little red machine held to her ear. Somehow the Dirt Devil turned into the phone receiver, and Mia stopped for a second and reflected on how she just lost some seconds, how hard those foam blocks would be to get back into the cushion-cases, a trip to Hawaii, a Xanax cocktail, an unwritten novel, Monty Python, the millennium ball, Larry King...

"H-hello?" she asked uncertainly, not even expecting it to be Frank, not even expecting the perfectly reasonable explanation, a strange sort of evaporation of these familiar forms--

"Mia?"

"Rachel?"

V.

Mia woke up to find Frank sleeping next to her, he must have come in during the night, and it was strange looking at him, because he was changed somehow, like it wasn't really Frank but Not-Frank instead. He had this veneer

over his skin, fine and imperceptible as carbon monoxide, and it reminded her of those picture-puzzles in the Fun Pads she would get as a kid, two pictures almost identical but with slight alterations, and one picture, if you looked closely enough, it had extra fingers and square wheels and all sorts of weird shit like that, and she remembered that such dissonance frightened her. It sparked the same sort of primal fear that watching people on TV getting pies thrown in their faces did, the sight of familiar features being so quickly obliterated, chunks running down their eyes and along the bridge of the nose, mouth erupting behind a mountain of foam.

Frank turned around in bed, unintentionally winding himself in the sheet.

A seraphic, close-eyed smile blossomed on his face as he regarded Mia.

“Hmn, good morning honey...”

My God, has it really been a full two weeks since the last time we set eyes upon each other?

*** **

Mia leaned her body against the sink, gray panties sticking out from the bottom of a white thin boy's T-shirt. The shirt didn't quite make it past her bellybutton, and the beige porcelain rim was cold against her stomach. She reached for the Aquafresh and tried to squeeze out enough to put on her brush (and also leave some for Frank), but only a scant minty smear kissed the surface of the bristles. Suddenly a pair of muscular hands reached from behind and grabbed her naked tummy.

“Hey, how's my baby doin'?”

Baby?

She got that same sensation of dissonance again, the two pictures, was she in the picture with the seven fingers on one hand—

Baby. Baby. Were they having a--

No, they weren't.

Baby, a slang expression, a pet name, oh baby baby—

Was she in the picture with the square sun?

Mia instinctively writhed under his roaming hands, writhing signifying ecstasy, signifying oh baby baby, body-language for I want to fuck you real bad, oh baby baby—

But she couldn't take her eyes off the sink drain.

Drain. Drain.

She pictured the word in her mind, literally pictured it, five letters—

—five points on a human, five points to a pentacle, as above so below...

It looked odd in her mind, the word “drain,” it looked like “drnkm.”

But she didn't say that, she didn't stop and discuss with Frank: did you ever really look at a word that you used all the time but now you really look at it and it looks bizarre, like “drain,” I am standing here looking at this drain – oh baby baby – and I am spelling the word in my mind and it looks like “drnkm.”

Oh, I'm sure you are laughing at me, at my antiquated prose, and believe me not. But do believe me, every word, no matter how fantastic to your ears, for I never lie.

Drnkm.

“When you wear that cute baby shirt it drives me crazy, your nipples look like bullets—“

He slid his hands up over her breasts and played with them like they were two foam tension-relievers. *Oh baby baby*, she responded, grinding her pelvis against the rim of the sink.

Oh, how can you stand such a randy, silly wretch like myself? She caught her reflection in the mirror on the medicine cabinet, and now even she looked like the denizen of the second picture on the Fun Pad, the one with the rabbit with the short, round ears of a monkey, the red banana, the—

Od bdyh bdyh—

*** **

The call from Rachel Merriwether was tucked away in the back-pocket of

Mia's mind, break glass, pull lever, real as rain. As she prepared breakfast for the Not-Frank who sat reading the sports section of The Daily News, fifteen minutes after they had fucked on the same beige hexagon-tiled bathroom floor the pills she almost overdosed on last light fell upon, ten minutes after she had washed her cunt vigorously out with soap, two minutes after the eggs didn't break right over the bowl and tiny shards of shell clung fast to the albumen and rendered Mia's fingers as useful as if her hand was encased in big unbendable Michelin Man gloves, Rachel's memory had suddenly been revived and touched repeatedly with quick, venerating strokes as if it was the wooden feet of a seven-foot Christ.

I feel as if I had known you all my life, never to recall a time when you weren't my sun.

Rachel, who she thought she had lost forever, had come back, had come to rescue her from this mutant world. Of course, the last time the two had spoken was quite unpleasant, Rachel accusing her of being a corrupt, weak-willed, homophobic, pathetic, whorish piece of stuck-up crap and hoping that she would die die die die die. But at the moment Mia felt utterly worthless and was willing to entertain any and all reasonable explanations that didn't involve Not-Frank, any bit of charity or genuine human emotion that validated her as a human being deserving of life.

Frank's teeth bit through the doughy yellow eggs and hit something hard that broke with a sickening, albeit mild, crunch. But he never mentioned the shells to Mia, because he wasn't petty, he wasn't the type of husband that dragged his wife across the counter by her hair and slammed her head up against a wall because she had been bad, because she had been careless with the food preparation. Frank had never hit his wife. He merely ground the hard pieces in his mouth until they became fine and powdery and then just swallowed it along with the rest, down his esophagus.

He looked across the table at Mia, who seemed absorbed in the task of gently but firmly pressing her Corn Flakes down with the convex side of her spoon until they were all properly flat and milk-engorged and formed a cohesive

mass like a pie or a cake corn flake chun fghlk cvgk...

He decided to turn a whimsical phrase in order to show her how foolish it was to be so long in the face when there were women out there being attacked in their apartments with no sign of forcible entry, attacked and drained of their blood, good women, women with respectable jobs who never got into no trouble, how'dya like to be one of those unlucky bitches, huh?

"You know, I heard those corn flakes taste even better once you *eat* them."

Mia looked up at him and reviewed what he just said over and over in her mind, trying to break out of the alternate picture in the puzzle, analyzing the content of Frank's words with the intensity and scrutiny one would reserve for Nietzsche.

My brave cowboy.

Once Rachel was redeemed, the world would turn and God would smile and all would be forgiven and Mia could go back to loving him, her Frank, he could stop being Not-Frank and be her Frank again and everything would be fine, because God would have offered a sign, like Joseph's dream and the dove across the waters, that He wants them to forgive one another and be redeemed and it would never happen again, right Frank, what did I do, Frank...

What did he say?

"...taste better once you eat them."

How should she react?

Eat your friggin' Corn Flakes.

*** **

"I've got a place to go tonight," Mia said, as if she was greeting some tennis ball Frank had foisted her way with one of her own.

Frank delicately sopped up the rest of the eggs with a piece of toast, and for the first time she noticed how dainty, how deliberate his big sinewy hands

actually were. He said nothing, but didn't seem intrigued or upset or jealous in any fashion by her statement, and though this didn't annoy her, she kinda wished it would have elicited any response other than the fine, unflappable motions of his eating habits.

"An old friend, from Sacred Heart," Mia added.

Frank was still calm, but mentally flipped through the file marked "Mia" in his brain, which didn't take long, as she knew relatively few people.

"Is it that dyke?"

Why yes, it *was* that dyke, but Frank didn't see the harm in that, maybe it could even be a little fun, maybe Mia'd come home with her and they'd all do a little *dance*...

It was actually kind of interesting. In fact, it actually gave him something else to think about other than the affair he was having with Myra Banes, and, as such, he actually didn't call her that night, actually.

*** **

When she entered the club, scanned its densely-packed interior, and found no Rachel, Mia suddenly got scared – she didn't feel comfortable standing in the midst of so many strange people, alone, wearing a short denim skirt and a skintight pink nylon top that showed off her boobies. What if somebody talked to her? What if someone bought her a drink & slipped her a date rape drug? Even the pumps that she wore gave her anxiety, the way her heels wobbled as she negotiated her way through the claustrophobic passage between the tables and the bar.

She stopped short of a human sea of bodies that dressed in goth, fetish, punk, and anime-inspired clothing and tried to make out Rachel in the crowd. The masses undulated and writhed to the music of the singer who was screaming into her cordless mike on the spare, black stage before them; a platinum-haired woman in her thirties dressed in a nun's outfit, the black robe of which she

occasionally yanked up to give the audience a flash of her fishnet stockings and her bare, shaved snatch that gleamed through the cutout crotch. The woman, who, according to the crude orange flyer that was handed out at the door, went by the name Usurpina, had the voice and cadence of a victim being stabbed with an ice pick in her throat, and the rising and falling screams of said diva unsettled Mia quite a bit. She was sure that if she didn't either turn around now and hail a cab back to L.I. or find Rachel soon she would be killed or be spiked in the back with heroin or something. She was so afraid of being swallowed up by this vast ocean of errant humanity, by the pierced and tattooed and the manic and the stoned and the alien, so very alien – but it was *she* who was the alien, the alien was Mia, and she just wanted to leave, but leave to *where*?

And what happened to the girl she used to be, the one who looked out into the plaid-and-navy conformity of an elite Catholic private school and desired nothing more than to shatter it, who observed the hypocrisy of her family and those her family wished to impress, all the secrets buried, all the hatreds frosted over with Dale Carnegie's advice on making friends and influencing people – the relentless press of respectable society, of devout Christianity, to bury all the rogue insects, rogue instincts...She'd pull a Tru on them and expose the whole thing, take a decade-and-a-half of notes and journals and weave a story and pull a mirror out of the cold black waters just like Lady of the Lake, show them all their own reflections and in so doing relinquishing all responsibility to that tribe, free to be you or me, free to be he or she...

As Usurpina belted out one more shrieking solo, as the press of the people and the smell of flesh through leather and cotton and latex inundated the smoke-drenched air, as her feet continued to wobble in her shoes, the last conversation she ever had with Rachel flashed back into her mind. It was all coming back to her, the way Rachel accused her of "selling out," criticizing her decision to wear contact lenses and get a perm, how it was all a ploy to get a husband and security and safety and leave Rachel and everything they built together behind...the idea that if she tried to accept some of the trappings of the status quo, she would be forced to take them all, that if you gave an inch to these

conformist bastards they'd demand the whole fucking yard, and in five, ten years she would be a whole new entity, swallowed up by the "Borg."

To Rachel it was a fight between good and evil, an all-or-nothing proposition...but Mia thought she could move successfully through the two worlds. She thought she would write her book and make the people see and in so doing reach some sort of synthesis...that she could write that book and print it and still live the life of security and acceptance that yes, deep down she really wanted--everybody wants to belong to *something*, and "selling out" or not has ultimately nothing to do with this basic primal fact.

But she never did write that book..

A strong hand squeezed her shoulder. Startled out of her reverie, she quickly whipped her head around.

"Rachel!"

Mia hugged her with all the intensity of a refugee who has not seen her family in years, an embrace so deep and longing that she never even paused to look at Rachel's face beforehand.

*** **

Rache gained about fifty pounds since Sacred Heart, but in Mia's eyes she was still *Rachel*, still that girl who painted designs on her bookbag in glitter and passionately loved Medieval Romances. She might have been dressed in that far-out gothic outfit, her hair might have been a different color, (and, most significantly, she herself was no longer wearing glasses), but these were all the bits of lint that people pick up when they get older, so many dust balls and crumbs and fortresses covering the surface of the perfect child within. She knew that the core of Rachel was still there, just as--she hoped (prayed in desperation)--the core of herself was, beyond the makeup, beyond the Xanax-induced smiles and years of acquiescences and chicken cookery.

"You look *great*, kiddo!" Rachel said, her eyes traveling up & down the length of Mia appreciatively.

“Oh, so do *you*! You’ve really developed your own unique look!”

“So did you!”

*** **

They sat at the bar, both ordering Coronas (though Rachel would never drink hers).

“So what have you been up to all this time?” Mia asked.

“Well, you know...some freelance...web-design...”

“That’s great! I heard the Web is a real ‘growth market.’ So you’re your own boss?”

“*Absolutely*,” Rachel answered, lightly fingering the frosty stem of her bottle.

“That’s so *wonderful*! You always *were* so smart and creative...”

“Well, hell, so were you! You ever finish that book?”

Mia’s face dropped slightly, then her eyes rolled playfully and she shook her head.

“I’ve got...all the chapters there, definitely. It’s just a matter of putting them together. I’ve just been so busy...what with my family, the office...”

“You married?”

“Oh yeah...three years this February. *Frank*. Great guy, really good to me...”

“*Cefalu*, huh? Mia Cefalu...sounds kind of like something you catch. Like, ‘I can’t come to work today because I’ve got that Cefalu that’s been going around...’”

Strained laughter peeled out of the two women, Rachel slapping the counter with her meaty palm. By now Usurpina’s set was long over and an emaciated man in a disco shirt & a guitar who thought he was Scott Wieland sat on a crate on stage and sang a cover of “Only Women Bleed.”

“It...was certainly a little getting used to. But I love it now, the name...it’s me, it’s who I am.”

“What is that, Cefalu, anyway?”

“Sicilian. An island in Sicily.”

“What is he, Mob?”

“Oh, gosh no, he’s a cop!”

“Wow....so you bagged a *cop*? No drugs at *your* house, huh?”

“No, of course not...regardless of him being a cop or not...we’re not like that...we’re very simple, with simple tastes.”

“So if he’s Sicilian he’s probably real *vengeful*, right? Vendettas and everything?”

“Frank’s not like that at all...he’s really a laid-back, anything goes type of guy...he’s really really *good* to me...”

Rachel rocked the still full yellow bottle between her thumb & forefinger and looked Mia square in the eye, searching...

“So you’d say you’re very happy with your life right now...how it all turned out?”

“Oh, yes,” Mia said without hesitation.

“I’ve gotta go pee something fierce,” Rachel said, putting her hand to just below her paunch and grimacing, “Forgot to go before I left the apartment today. You gotta go?”

“You know me,” Mia said, flashing a sweet, goofy smile, “bladder of Kleenex!”

*** **

The restroom consisted of a doorless filthy space covered with graffiti and band notices, the two stalls without locks and surrounded by wet puddles. Mia entered one, immediately started surveying the urine spill on the seat, and rolled out great handfuls of toilet paper to build a cushion upon which to sit.

Rachel didn’t enter a stall. She waited for Mia to finish.

Mia didn’t ask why she didn’t go to the bathroom. She stepped through the

door and turned back at Rachel, that queer light that reflected from her eyes, her crimson hair and lips, the mounds of her pale breasts pushed up in the corset, skin as fair as any marble statue or fluttering Pre-Raphaelite beauty, and Mia admitted to herself why she had taken such pains to prepare herself for this night, she had did it because she was taken by Rachel's beauty, then—

—as now—

(as above so below, now and again, a thousand years since practicing the first rituals upon this riotous green)

—and as Rachel approached her, never letting the gaze drop, Mia loosened, things in her brain that had once been tense—clinging terrified to the side of her skull, afraid to get smacked again—became limber and fell into a sea of red light, and Rachel was now a breath's distance from her, breast-to-breast and (the only time she ever felt calm was when the woman at he beauty parlor washed her hair, the weight of the warm water over her scalp, and soothing fingers) they embraced, easily, smiling like two children that had suddenly stumbled upon something indescribably wonderful, and then Rache parted her lips and sunk her fangs into Mia's neck like a dog.

VI.

Rache clung to Mia's neck like a starving baby that had been driven near insanity by the lacteal funk of her mother's swollen tit, and he blood tasted very sweet.

At first Mia thought that she had simply been bit, maybe not even in a mean way, maybe in a sexy way, because she new that Rachel was into rough love.

But there was the *suction*.

The pressure of being penetrated and drawn from, like a syringe, but thicker, more volume.

At first Mia didn't know what to say.

So Rache said it, said it after she pushed her back into the stall, onto the floor, the cold wet of piss soaking into the pink nylon of her shirt, Rache on top of her, heavy.

"Is it good?" Rache asked in a low, slithering voice.

Mia tried to sit up but her arms slid away from her, Rache's body holding her own fast, pinning her like a nail through a specimen moth, limbs light, getting lighter and more useless. Rache leaned close into her red and white mottled face and barked:

"IS IT GOOD?!"

Then she bit her again, in the same spot, but quicker, as if she was taking a joint, inserting and drawing swift and savoring, letting the fangs exit jagged, dragging against the wound, enlarging it, making Mia's head squirm within her bed of chestnut locks in pain. Rache's jaws dripping red upon exit, letting the claret fall down all over herself with the relish of the child whose face grew dark and sticky as the result of eating the chocolate, the one drop that plummeted from her chin and landed in a neat crimson dot upon her white breast, like Snow White's mother pricking her finger and bleeding upon the alabaster field of her own needlepoint, conceiving her on that fabric for the first time unknowing like Disney sketching a mouse, I birth you, I birth you, you will come, you will come...

Mia's eyes met those of the ghostly smeary face from above, but it was an unequal gaze.

(it was great, it was great, the adrenaline rush, the pale dumb rabbit before you)

Someone entered the room, Rache heard it and she covered Mia's mouth and nose with her meaty hands, not just to quell the noise that she hadn't as yet begun to utter, but simply to block, to suffocate, to blot out, it, this *thing*, this horrible injured horse that had to be taken care of, this injured horse who knew her when she was human, when they were both whipped awkward injured hor--

(Would have been funner if she struggled more. Would have been funner. Blood rage. Blood rage. Blood rage. Would have been--)

*** **

The resident of the adjacent stall, a pixyish woman with short blond hair and dark, finely shaped eyebrows, put down her Hello Kitty mini-backpack, pulled down her Sailor Moon underwear, bunched up her purple feather-covered skirt up to her breasts, and held it in place with her chin as she did number one. Suddenly, she got the strangest of feelings that she was going to do number two, which wouldn't have been surprising, because she had consumed five squares of Ex-Lax that night, so she waited, and as she waited, a hand reached from under the partition and gripped her left ankle, the one with the tattoo of the yin-and-yang sign on it, and Rache rolled from under the space dashing like Indiana Jones right before the stone door slammed shut and she tore this bitch's throat right out, and if Mia could only see, could only see what was going on in the next stall, the strip of flesh torn away from the neck like peeling paint, the gurgling voicebox, dying in a pool of her own blood while on the can, for Christ's sake, *Christ's sake Mia, did you see what I could have done to you if I really hadn't cared for you at all?*

But Mia didn't see anything, she just lay there on her back, a trail of blood leaking out of her neck from two purple ragged holes, and all she could think about, until she saw the scarlet pool seep through from the other side, was that she had found herself often in this position in her life. On the floor.

And where was Rache? Did she leave? This was anticlimactic.

Well.

I'm depressed.

*** **

A warm tide reached Mia's hair and permeated it. She shifted her head to

look. As she regarded the blood before her, her tongue drifted lazily out of her mouth, like a mouse creeping out of its hole. The pink tip meandered into the fluid and slowly let the taste soak the tiny bumps on its surface, and news of this flavor spread from the mouth onward to the heart and the veins and the nerve-endings and the stomach-lining and finally to the brain, which had been stubborn and turned it away a couple of times, like one would do to an annoying door-to-door salesman, and when the brain finally registered this news, as parts of it already started to build new structures within its environs, Mia got up and screamed. And screamed loud.

But nobody heard her. She screamed but nobody went inside the restroom to investigate. She sat up, one hand bracing herself against the toilet, the other clasping against the wound on her neck, and she screamed. She scampered across the smooth, dirty surface of the floor on her hands and knees, pushing past the stall door with her head, unable to stand, and she screamed. She saw the slack ankles of the woman in the next stall, white DKNY sandals dyed dark pink by blood, she saw the Hello Kitty bag surrounded by an ocean of blood, she saw a purple feather floating in it, now not floating, now matted and drowned and motionless in blood, and she screamed. Her red fingernails clawed against the surface of the grimy basin, unable to catch onto anything, vainly scraping against its surface like an insect caught in a jar; then the muscles in her torso and legs started to kick in, the muscles in her back flexed and grew stronger, her frenzied searching arms reached higher, they gripped the edge of the basin and she pulled herself up, pulled herself up though her legs were rubbery and trembling, she looked at herself in the mirror, and she screamed, and nobody came, though the band played on outside.

Blood covered thinly one side of her face, like a glaze of red watercolor, and her hair was wet and dripping with it, and it all smelled like meat, like a juicy steak fresh from its wrapper. On the other side, on her neck, she bled from two messy holes, not bleeding as in a spurt or a flow, but a near-black ropy ooze that spread upon contact with her pink shirt and soaked it brown. Her complexion alternated between flushed and dead-pale in lumpy, irregular patches, and

shadows perched upon her cheeks and lower eyelids, and she looked very ill, and she screamed, *loud*, but nobody came, so she ran out of the room.

And she ran past the mountain of band equipment, stumbling upon the gray duct-taped wire of one of the amps, regaining her balance, if the word “balance” can be used in this context, and running past the small room that smelt like weed and spilt beer where Usurpina and a tall skinny man with a pitted face and white spiked hair fucked upon a rug and pillows, and she poked her head in and screamed but they didn’t hear her, they kept fucking, they kept fucking and he flipped her over and did it from behind, and Mia kept running, past the stage, into the crowd, now unable to run but instead to seep, seeping past each person, to take advantage of spaces that were formed by absence and move past them before they closed up again, and she occasionally looked into a dancer’s face and screamed, screaming like talking, screaming like explaining, “See? I’m hurt. Somebody hurt me. Somebody did this to me,” but nobody heard her, they just kept hopping and thrashing their bodies to the beat, and she finally made it to the narrow aisle that led out to the door, and she ran through it, screaming, screaming and realizing, by the time she got outside, that nothing had come out of her mouth, this whole time, the screaming had been confined to her head.

*** **

Frank didn’t call Myra that night, and it hurt her deeply. She felt very used and neglected, and she wrote some angry poetry that expressed how she felt, and she fantasized about publishing it one day for all the world to see, and Frank coming across it and being really shocked and surprised and ashamed and flattered, yes, a touch flattered as well, because Myra immortalized him.

But mostly ashamed, ashamed for treating her so terribly, treating her so terribly by not calling, by throwing her life into the void.

She popped *Interview With The Vampire* into the VCR and watched it for the 17th time.

VII.

Mia had stopped running as soon as she reached the outside, as if the gray night air slapped her in the face and bid her to regain her senses. For some reason she had the sudden conception of night as a masculine form without any other color than night, no whites of the eyes, no gradations of tone, simply a blind indigo in the shape of a man.

She walked in the manner of a marathon runner who chooses to move under her own volition at the end of a race instead of passing out fetal and crying as paper cups of water are tossed upon her by all manner of concerned spectator. For to continue hysteria was to confirm what had all just happened, and that was forbidden.

Unconsciously she raised one hand to her cheek and started to rub the dried blood off, little twisted bits of it rolled up and away like eraser droppings.

She didn't try her voice again, and felt no pressing need to do so. But her mind began to get orderly, very orderly, and communicated to her shattered body exactly what procedure was to be followed next.

- 1) Find a place to get clean, because you're dirty.
- 2) People are staring at you, because you look like a fucking horror show.
- 3) If Frank sees you like this, he is going to get upset.
- 4) Find a place to get clean, change your clothes. Perhaps stay the night.

Tell Frank that you drank a little too much and was in no shape to get home. He might think you're lying, he might think you had sex with Rachel, but it is certainly better that presenting this awful platter to him. You must spare everybody this. You have no right to inflict this upon those who care about you.

- 5) Get clean, you fucking filthy horror show.
- 6) Everything's going to be okay.

*** **

Mia passed Coney Island High, passed the comic book store and the CD store and the sock vendor and the myriad vendors of such jewelry – big as bottlecaps – as Rache might have worn...she reached the giant Gap on the corner, whose ads in the window assured her that yes, indeed, denim jackets were again in, you chic devil you, and she crossed the street and went back down St. Mark's, past storefronts with yellowing T-shirts in the window decorated with OJ's mug shot and Kurt Cobain's death certificate and Fester giving a blowjob to a lightbulb...past another CD store and more jewelry vendors, past loops filled with imitation Buddhist power-bracelets in every shade, power-bracelets to match any color-scheme, power-bracelets for a buck a piece, and she passed Kim's Video and Trash and Vaudeville – where Rache might have gone to buy the clothes she was to wear with the jewelry, as big as bottlecaps, that she bought across the street – and she passed a pizza joint on the corner and turned left out towards sixth, going down past the stores and restaurants and out to where things were empty, out to where the rainbow ended...and she did not think about her situation too closely this whole time nor did she attempt to speak nor did she mark her surroundings even in the meager detail I have presented to you, dear readers, no she thought of nothing at all, and she wasn't mad, no she wasn't mad, nor was she sad, she was simply alone at the edge of the universe and the night-man was watching her with his blind indigo-eyes, and the moon was waning to a thin white C.

Not that Mia ever could have reason to know this, but the area was notorious as a vampire hangout, a place both in proximity to the beautiful people and deserted enough to hide the flotsam. In fact, had Mia walked up one avenue she would have been in range of the sausage-shop atop which Rache set up house. Life is chock full of such fun coincidences, and the careful, conscientious few (conscientious being the buzzword on children's report-cards for more grown-up terms and phrases such as "neurotic," "overly-sensitive," "displaying

obsessive-compulsive tendencies,” and “borderline schizophrenic”) can recognize them as little colorful tacky-tacky flags with which to create a map that might lead one into the arms of one’s soulmate or one’s monster.

There was somebody following Mia, following her ever since the Gap on the corner of St. Mark’s – the store with the signs proclaiming that yes! indeed! denim jackets were again in style and everyone should be in them – and he never let her form out of his sight, it hung upon his wet eyeballs like the white shiny spots that seem an intrinsic part of one’s iris, much like the black hole and the surrounding sphere of color are, but which are just reflected light that came from outside oneself.

*** **

By the time both of them reached the place where the rainbow ended, where the few people who were outside clung close to buildings – by the steps and by the garbage, tucked neatly away – he had reduced the distance between them considerably. Now he was only about six feet away. He was surprised she didn’t notice, because usually her kind was hypervigilant about such things.

Joshua Brundage took special caution with her, because he had a feeling that something wasn’t quite right, that the arrow wasn’t going to fall into the neat concentric circle, but on the edge between two.

She suddenly turned around, in slow motion, like in a syrupy dream – and just by looking at him, she knew, instinctively, what he was.

She threw her arms around him, burying her face against the faded green cotton of his jacket, crying.

“Thank God! Thank God! *Help* me!”

He raised his arms around her, awkwardly, not sure of what to do. Her touch – warm, feminine, not at all what he was prepared for – couldn’t have been more disarming than if she had taken an ax and hacked his limbs from his shoulders. He tentatively embraced her as she cried, Mia crying so hard she turned bright red in the face and choked.

“Thank God you came! Thank God! Help me!”

*** **

Joshua gripped Mia’s hand firmly as they passed the human skeletons that were draped across the front steps of the building, skeletons emanating sour gray smells and possessing quick inquisitive eyes that scanned and evaluated and tucked you into their memory for perhaps future usage. The sight of such creatures would normally have unsettled Mia into retreat – but the touch of her Hero’s palm, warm and strong, seemed to provide her with an armor by association. This was the man, she knew, that she lived all those years to find, the reason why the pills fell away from the danger of her self-destruction and onto the tiled floor. A man *beyond*. Because all her life, she yearned for the world beyond.

The door to the lobby had been rent of its lock long ago, and Joshua stuck his fingers through the hole and pushed; it flung from its loose hinges easy and open. In every corner were piles of refuse, of needles and rags and spent condoms and candy bar wrappers, huddled together under a blackness of grime and soot that gave the elements uniformity, transformed them into single units of crap that could be conveniently lifted up and away by some sanitation technician, if one deigned to make the journey past the bony gatekeepers and their digging stares.

They approached the thick metal door of the elevator, decades of paint worn from its surface to reveal a dark red that was almost ebony, its diamond-shaped, gated window boasting dozens of captive pennies, giving it the aura of a wishing-well.

“Breathe through your mouth,” Joshua said to Mia as they boarded the cart. She quickly did so, because the stench from urine was overwhelming, but such indignities paled in the face of his voice, the voice that only made one precious harmony in her ears, the command “Come with now.” Everything he did

was jewelry, were dried precious flowers pressed into the leaves of a Greek epic. This man was beyond. She had to stick with him, she had to become part of this beyond...although of course she didn't justify this as plainly as I am telling you, rather, it was more of an unarticulated longing in the style of the last great gasp of sexual desire before a woman begins her monthly cycle.

They never stopped holding hands, the space between their palms was wet and mutual – even when the dread machine stuttered between floors, every jerky move seeming to foretell an impending snap and plunge, they never unclasped. The sound of their breath dragging steady between their teeth.

In one movement they disembarked from the elevator and into the dark hallway, and Joshua produced from his pocket a heavy bundle of keys strung together by a metal ring. The chorus of unlocking commenced; he performed this mechanically, every key memorized and brought into the bowels of the structure immediate, barrels turning.

Suddenly they heard a slow, groaning creak behind them, of a door across the hall. Mia squeezed Joshua's hand in fear as an emaciated face spied them through the narrow opening, gray fingers leaking nervously out and twitching as if they were insect-like feelers.

"You okay?" Joshua asked her.

"Y--yeah..."

"He's harmless."

Pause.

The man across the hall had removed his fingers from the door and began stroking his exposed, shriveled penis, the member resembling an aged carrot leeched of its orange color. He emitted a low, strained sound that resembled the plucking of a tight wire.

He quickly ushered her into the apartment and stepped back out into the hall.

"Lock the door," he told her.

Mia, still stunned by the detaching of palms – of how quickly the heat left her – started turning the knobs, started sliding chains into grooves. Outside the

sound of Joshua breaking down the man's door and beating him senseless rang through the building, fists to thin flesh and bone thundering like a steady hammer upon rotting wood.

She was so flattered, it made the words choke in her throat.

*** **

The walls were pictureless, devoid of coloring except for the movement of gray that started black by the floor and slowly, imperceptibly, lightened until it was sooty white at the tip. Four walls, a tiny doorless bathroom to the side – and Mia loved these things, these peculiarities of living-space, because they belonged to the man who was beyond, whose life transcended such banal trappings of day-to-day living and burst out into defending. Yes, instinctually she knew he was a defender; a defender from what she had no idea, but a Hero most certainly.

"You should bathe now," he said, producing a bottle of hydrogen peroxide from inside a sealed bag. "Wash your wound out. Use the whole bottle. I'll be here waiting."

The bottle, its clean, clinical surface, filled with words about disinfecting and fluid ratios, was stark against such an environment – magic like the purity of a sacred sword.

"What...should I do about my clothes?" Mia asked in a strange, foreign, almost coy manner, cradling the bottle in her questioning hands.

*** **

Mia let the water from the shower continue to beat down on her as she worked at her wounds with a wad of toilet paper saturated in hydrogen peroxide. The area around the bloodless holes had swollen like boils, but shrunk as she squeezed them, a dark brown chunky pus released and washed away down past

her breasts, down away. Perhaps this was not the most medically sound way to deal with her injury – after all, didn't they say one should never pick at a blemish, for risk of spreading the infection?

But she had to get rid of them somehow, or else he would see--

he?

who?

Frank.

She was naked in the doorless bathroom of a stranger's house, pouring disinfectant into a wound. Why didn't the wound sting?

She...

She'd blow her brains out rather than have a mercy fuck.

What?

She felt very horny. The bottle was empty. She threw the wad of paper, faint stain of brown from the pus, into the toilet. The water continued to spray down, thundering upon the surface of the moldy rubber shower-mat, as she stepped out the bathroom, dripping wet. She was going to climb on top of this man and fuck him. This was what she was going to do in a stranger's house.

She snuck into his room. The bottle rolled back and forth under the torrent of water, empty, gallons of water shooting down the drain.

Joshua was sitting on his bed, looking at photographs spread out upon the naked mattress, next to an opened Bible and some sort of pointy stick. He looked up at her at the sound of her bare feet upon the wooden floor. In his hands he held a folded shirt and pants. His expression was impossible to identify.

"I-I'm sorry..." she said.

"S'alright. Don't be. You're ill."

"Who are in those pictures?" Mia asked as she started to put on the clothing, though in her heart she knew they had to be his family and she was showering in the apartment of a family man, *oh dirty dirty Mia!*

"My kids. Wife."

"Do you...keep in touch with them?"

Mia looked small in Joshua's big clothes, Mia rarely looked small in

anything because she was so tall.

“They’re dead.”

Now that she had confirmation that there was some distance between him and the people in the photographs she allowed herself to look at them – their sightless eyes would not mark her with shame and accusation. There was one photograph of the two children in front of a house on a sunny day; a girl of about sixteen and a boy of around thirteen. The girl had black shoulder-length hair pushed away from her face with two barrettes, her petite frame draped in a sundress. She had a confident, almost haughty expression that took root mostly in her striking blue eyes, and she held her body in a jaunty manner, as if relishing the opportunity to pose. The boy smiled shyly from under a shock of dirty-blond, unruly hair, twirling some sort of string in his hands. All the way to the side of the photograph one could make out the start of an adult woman, probably his wife, that was accidentally caught in frame.

The words came out of her mouth without her realizing what they were:

“How did they die?”

Mia’s fingers flew to her mouth in self-admonishment. “*Oh!* You don’t have to tell me, sorry, I...”

Joshua’s eyes hadn’t left the collection of photographs on the mattress almost the entire time she spoke to him. But now they flew up and bored into her skull.

“*Vampires.*”

The reality suddenly hit Mia, the reality of the previous night and what had happened to her and where she was and what she would come home to. *Everything*, and her hands crumpled into clawlike structures of anguish and panic and she started to scream.

“A vampire *took* you last night,” he said, starting to rise off the bed.

“No....no vampires, there’s no such thing as...”

He grabbed her by the hair and pushed her face into the pile of photos on the bed.

“Vampires, they’re *real!* They *killed* these people! *Look at them!* Vampires

did this! And many more!”

He lifted her head, which was manically shaking back and forth as if to deny everything he just said, and brought it up to his own.

“They’re *everywhere*!”

She let out a throat-ripping wail and continued to shake her head, babbling incoherently, saliva dripping down her chin. His hand, the warm palm that she had held earlier as they made their journey past the addicts, filled her vision as he smacked her unconscious.

*** **

Mia regained consciousness in Joshua’s arms, the two of them lying upon the photographs on his bed.

His piercing blue eyes gazed upon her.

“You were hysterical.”

“I-I know...I’m sorry...”

He helped her to a sitting position, then motioned for her to stand.

“It’s late. You’d better get home. You probably got someone waiting for you, right?”

Frank’s image swam in her mind and made her heart accelerate in anxiety.

“But...couldn’t I stay here? I don’t...know how I could explain--“

“I have things to do.”

His coldness made her want to cry. Reluctantly, she followed him to the door, took his hand as they entered the hall, entered the inconsistent elevator that stank, down breathing through the mouth and out again down the steps past the bad men, down blocks and away – and then he let go and began to leave, and she reached out to him in panic, her fingers gliding over his army jacket, this man, this man who was beyond, and now she had to face the not-beyond, share a bed with not-Frank, back to the second picture in the Fun Pad, the one with the

girl with two irises in one eye, nononono...

“Can...can I see you again?”

“You will...” He kissed her cheek with partless lips. “...I promise.”

VIII.

Tears poured down Frank’s face as he held Mia’s hand in both of his own.

“Only...only *good times* now, honey, okay? Only good times...”

She had just been released from the hospital, where she had been admitted to the emergency room after fainting on the sidewalk in oversized man’s clothes with what looked like a pair of healing puncture wounds on her neck. Her husband was sure it was a rapist of some kind who kidnapped her; Mia claimed she had no memory of what happened after she entered the club.

“It’s those fucking pervert punk drug-addicts,” Frank said angrily. Rooke offered to help him canvas the area, find some perps, and “show them the law,” but Mia seemed in no shape to be alone. It broke Frank’s heart to see her in bed like that, pale, bandages covering the side of her neck (they appeared to be there more for the simple act of covering and removing from sight rather than assisting in the healing process). He bought her all manner of white teddy bear and floral arrangements, and the bedroom began to resemble a Mafia funeral. In the days of confusion he completely forgot about Myra Banes, and when the thought would creep up he would think: *that bitch! that slut! How could I have been with her, that harlot, when my baby Mia is her the only woman I ever loved?*

And soon things began to return to normal, the memories of that night with Rachel and the man who was beyond growing fuzzy in Mia’s view like sight from a diminished eye – and it was all so fantastic anyway that perhaps (perhaps as loving Frank presented her with breakfast in bed and inhaled her aura and burst out in smiles) it all never took place at all, any of it. Perhaps it all was a nervous breakdown. And as the days passed, she even forgot about the nervous

breakdown.

*** **

But one day Mia had a creeping fear. She was eating takeout fried chicken with Frank (he would buy her dinner so she wouldn't have to waste any of her recovery energy cooking) at the dining room table when suddenly her eyes fell on a certain spot on the floor. She quickly returned her attention to the feast at hand, marveling at the delicate way Frank would eat a drumstick – using a knife and fork because he hated to get messy, *my brave clean cowboy*, not afraid to show his sensitive side – but the fear continued to creep, it made her sneak out of bed that night and tiptoe to that spot between the floorboards, searching for that little triangle of paper, only the moonlight guiding her. And when she did not find it she searched the length of that particular board, guiding her fingernail along the gap, and when she still didn't find it she started to trace every board, stealthily, noiselessly, and hours later she was satisfied, and just as she turned to tiptoe back to her bedroom she caught a glimpse of the night view from outside her window, the houses slumbering giants, little pinprick stars, the threatening sun just under the horizon. The air that wafted in from the little open crack in the window, it had a certain smell she never quite recognized before; oh, it was *natural* enough, what was it, it...

A pair of teenagers strolled arm in arm, quite leisurely for a couple of kids on a school night. The baggy pants and construction-orange puffy coat the boy wore obscured his lanky frame, and the limp bangs that fell from his otherwise close-cropped head kept brushing past his eyes. The girl wore a silver jacket that seemed too thin for that crisp weather, and the little plastic butterflies that were clipped to either side of her head gave away any pretensions she had to adulthood. The boy started to nuzzle his head in the girl's neck, and as Mia viewed this, she felt muscles on the tops of her ears startle. The smell...

...it was their *blood* pumping, she smelt it through their arteries.

She slid the window shut, and the noise startled the couple. It apparently

startled Frank as well, because suddenly light flooded the room.

“Mia? It’s late...”

She turned around and absently rested one hand on her stomach, liking the way it rested on her silky nightgown.

“Oh, I...heard a noise. I thought someone was breaking in...”

Frank laughed lightly and brought his wife close to his body.

“Well, I think if there’s going to be a burglar, I’d be able to handle it...I’ve got a lot of experience with ‘bad guys’.”

He kissed her, and his breath was still minty.

Soon everything faded again, as it always did resting within the sanctity of his arms, all was right in the world, and best of all, there was no letter.

*** **

Myra regarded the crinkled, worn piece of paper she received in the mail, no return address or explanation, with disgust.

“That *prick*....”

MOTHER OF DRACULA

“I’ve forgiven him,” Caril said. “We are all part of the same larger whole. He wasn’t ready. He would have been miserable if he stayed.” She removed the larger bills from the register first, the two fifties under the rack, then the twenties, counting them. “That was his life-path. Mine was with Rachel. In the end, we are all just packets of energy.”

The balding, ruddy man in the Tevas and the worn Sinead O’Connor T-shirt nodded knowingly at her words, adding, “Vibrating atoms. Dreamt of by a being of pure love.” His dick twitched softly at the sight of her soft, freckled breast-skin, peeking out playfully from the low neckline of her cinammon-colored peasant dress. *Still pretty good for a middle-aged lady*, he thought. How he would like to fuck her now, in the empty shop. Dripping down Sinead’s head was a long reddish-brown stain from the Frogurt he ate earlier. “How’s she doing, by the way?”

“Who?” Caril asked absently.

“Rachel.”

She winced as the rubberband she stretched around the thick stack of twenties snapped apart, licking her hands raw; undeterred, she pulled the two slack ends tight and bound them together. “She’s doing well, still studying abroad. Last time I heard from her, was from a hostel in Madrid. Just arrived there after her French adventure. The Louvre. Teaching students English in exchange for room and board. She loved it there, loved it.”

“She’s a lucky girl...I remember when I did my whole Europe thing...but now the big trip for me is Southeast Asia.”

“Me too! I’d *love* to go on a tour of Vietnam!” She tucked a platinum-blond strand of hair behind her ear, her delicate, almost girlish face breaking into an enthusiastic, agreeing smile. Thoughts of traveling down an amber-shadowed

river regaled her senses, the smell of jasmine, green mists, now aqua, now puffs of black...perhaps she would have fucked him. But then they couldn't be friends. Because. All men are bastards. And they produced bastards.

And she had business to do later on that night, anyway.

Caril deposited the bundle of cash through the toothy maw of the drop-slot. The store had done well this weekend. Which was good, because all of Caril's positive-thinking books and Reiki classes aside, she couldn't shake the feeling that this Boho pottery venture, China in a Bullshop, was her last chance. It had been years since her collection of poetry took the literati by storm – "Sylvia Plath for the Laugh-In crowd," the critics called it – breaking through into the mainstream, James Taylor even adapting one of her works to music. But after she had Rachel...

But that was the past. She had Rachel. Rachel grew up, Rachel was lost. Caril sent a private investigator to track her down. He disappeared.

She hired another private investigator.

*** **

Every plate, every cup in China in a Bullshop was created by an independent artist, doing what artists were supposed to do, which was their craft and their craft alone. There were no Mikasas or Lenoxes in her collection. Just hand-blown glasses in a myriad of hues, textured earthenware etched with the patterns of leaves, dishes with artwork so love-lovely upon their surfaces that one could scarcely eat off them for fear of tarnishing their finish. One-of-a-kinds, art, truly priceless pieces were it not for the fact that their creators needed to pay their rent and utilities.

Caril loved surrounding herself with the fruits of such creativity, especially now. That she couldn't write anymore.

A three-foot cherry-red wooden Buddha with a dollar taped over his bellybutton sat in a corner upon an altar filled with stones, shells, and candles. A picture of Rachel was taped onto the underside of Caril's counter, she didn't

know quite why she did it, it was just...the *energy*...the image needed to be flipped and suspended, somehow, to lessen the power of the energy...In the photo, Rachel was twelve and wearing a striped shirt and red pair of shorts, her dirty-blond hair tied back in a thick ponytail & a thick pair of glasses on her face. Her body was still chubby in a child sort of way though in actuality this was not as a result of her youth but the weight fluctuations that had pursued her whole life.

Perhaps what disturbed Caril about the photograph was the way that her daughter's eyes directly met those of the viewer, as if to challenge, accuse. The rest of the face was a little blurry, as she was turning around when the photo was taken, but the eyes remained clear and distinct.

A witch-doctor that Caril had gone to listen to at the Learning Annex seminar had once talked about power objects. This certainly would be one, a veritable two-dimensional vortex into a universe of obscurity and potential dark dealings that she only half-wanted to hear about.

If only Rachel had taken her advice and went to those Scientology sessions!

A large shadow appeared within the lilac curtain covering the front door, followed by a knock. She felt a twinge of panic shoot through her spine, then ran to open the door.

The short but heavysset mustachioed man in the ill-fitting brown suit took off his hat, revealing the sweaty, curly black hair beneath. He looked like an insurance adjuster calmly accepting his impending heart-attack.

"Mmmmmmmnnnniss Mmmnnerrrryweather..." he said, the inflection in his voice indicating that this was a greeting as opposed to a statement of fact.

"Hi!" Caril a little too cheerfully answered, taking hold of one of his massive arms and leading him to a chair. "You must be Mr. Giuffre. Would you like some herbal tea?"

"Ummnnnn..."

Caril motioned to the back room. "No trouble at all! Got a microwave and a whole bunch of teas, I get so many as samples from retailers, you see, and I've just GOT to get rid of them..."

"I'mmmnn not really..."

"C'mon! Some Jasmine-Ginko Supreme? Raspberry-Chai?"

"I'mmmnn really a *coffee* guy..."

Caril's face snapped into a mask of disapproval.

"That caffeine'll *kill* you! Besides, it drives you crazy. All my teas are 100-percent natural and caffeine-free."

The man blinked for a second, got lost in a thought, and shook his head slightly to shake himself out of it. "Umnnn, Mmmmmnnniss Mmmnnnnerrryweather, about your daughter..."

"*Wait!*" Caril almost screamed, "Let me pull up a chair." She grabbed the chair from behind her counter, her eyes darting quickly to and away from the Polaroid power-object strapped to its underside. She dragged the metal legs across the floor in a terrible screech and deposited it and herself in front of the large, profusely perspiring man. Her trembling hands rested upon her bare, tightly pressed-together knees. "Okay! Fire away. Tell me anything. I'm prepared."

"Umnnnn..."

*** **

"Your daughter is a vammmpire, Mmmmmmmnnniss Mmmnnerrryweather."

Caril smiled at the man blankly. "Yes?"

"I know that sounds, ummmnnn, unnnnbelievable..."

"Yes?"

"But I have, umnnnn, a specialty, you mmmight say, in the fields of the ummmnnnn...parrannnnormal, and I ..."

"Yes?"

"I, ummmnnn, guess you didn't know that about mmme, but yes, I have worked on several cases that you mmmight say are concerned with the "Seventh Realmmmmm" as it were, huhuhuh, annnd..."

“Yes?”

“Your daughter is indeed a vammmpire – in fact, a very...well-known one, in such circles...”

“Yes?”

“Innnnn fact, I have reasonnnn to believe that she was responsible for the previous investigator’s....*disappearance*...”

“Yes?”

“She is right here in New York, as a mmmatter of fact...”

“Yes?”

“Goes by the name of ‘Rache,’ ummnnn, which I guess is short for *Rachel*, huhuhuh....”

“Yes?”

“And so there you go.”

“Yes?”

The man shifted in his seat under the wide eyes and steady smile of his client. He attempted to cross one leg upon the other, but didn’t quite make it, so he fidgeted and returned her smile as if he hadn’t any intention of crossing his legs at all, but was just stretching. Caril continued to smile a little longer in the uncomfortable silence that followed, until she nodded firmly, her mouth dropping into a serious line, and said,

“You’re fucking insane.”

*** **

“Get out of my store!!!” she shrieked, hustling herself and the sizable Mr. Giuffre to the door and nearly ripping the lock out of the frame in the effort of opening it.

“Mmmmmmmnnniss Mmmnnerrrryweather...”

“You...you...QUACK!”

Caril pushed him out, slammed the door, and rested her head awhile upon the silky lilac curtain draped upon it. “No...quacks are doctors...what he is...is

a...big phony!" She smacked her palm across her thigh with a loud smack.

"Big...stupid...fat...phony-baloney!"

She headed for the counter and tore the photo of her daughter free from its adhesive restraints, bringing it to her altar.

"Raja Dee was right – never turn to the emblems of the Western, left-brain establishment for what can be done only by one's *spirit-guides*..."

She reached into a cabinet built into the altar and pulled out a box of matches and cones of incense. She tossed the incense in a big clay bowl and set them on fire...then she meticulously went through the entire store and lit every candle, hundreds of candles, most store-stock.

"Western...left-brain...phoney-baloneys!"

When she shut off all the overhead lights the shop glittered and keened within the glow of the candles like night down 42nd Street. She removed all her clothing, knelt in front of the altar – in front of the smiling, placid red Buddha with the photo placed upon its lap – and said:

"Rachel!!! It's *Mommy*!!!"

*** **

"Rachel, can you hear me...it's your mother...I've missed you..."

Caril allowed her brain to let in the amber light, the amber light twisting and bending in the smoke of the incense into an aqua...the aqua light massaged her brain, seeping, kneading her soul with thick, powerful hands...

"Rachel, can you hear me? It's mommy...mommy really *loves* you...reach out...reach out to me..."

The girl in the photo was staring attentively at her naked mother, it seemed, the blur lines fading and replaced by a figure that was facing directly out from the surface and into the smoky flickering atmosphere of the store, into the smoky flicking eyes of Mother. Caril nodded her head vigorously at this development, encouraging whatever essence of her daughter had deigned to visit.

“Yes, yes, Rachel, it’s *mommy*, mommy loves you and just wants you to come back home...talk to me...communicate with me...”

The image of Rachel squinted her eyes a bit, tilting her head as if considering her mother’s invitation – then rejecting it by beginning to turn away, her face obscured by the movement so as even the eyes were lost.

Caril gesticulated with her arms in panic.

“No honey, don’t go!! Mommy wants to *talk* to you! Mommy’s sorry for all the things she might have done that caused you pain!”

Rachel kept turning away.

“Mommy’s...sorry that she didn’t let you go to that Whitesnake concert! But...those rock n’ roll types are just no good, Rachel, they *hurt* people...I wanted only the best for you...come back...”

The child’s head in the picture was now completely facing away. Caril’s voice reached a thin, desperate wail.

“Come back!!! I want to know what you’re doing now!!! *Mommy loves you!!*”

The aqua light never stopped infiltrating Caril’s energy, massaging it, now grinding it, now from aqua to red, and red dark and dirtied into black –

“Come to me! *Talk* to me! I want to know what happened to you–“

The figure in the photograph suddenly whirled around to face Caril, its expression vast and threatening, smiling as if it heard the funniest joke in the world and was afraid to let out the tiniest peep as if so much humor released might tear its body to pieces. Caril smiled back hopefully.

“H-honey?”

*** **

It was strange to see that narrow strip of artificial light, where the partially drawn storefront gate terminated and the preternatural glow from within the store shone out. It made passerby feel weird, not knowing whether the store was closed or open; made them feel uneasy about that spot, like it was playing hooky

from the rest of the storefronts, it just wasn't right. Every once in a while, if you watched patient like an unblinking camera recording tree growth, you'd see a pair of bare feet skitter by, might catch the twinkle of pottery shattering against the floor.

Three days, three days of solitude, of unopen store, of unanswered phone, of stock deliveries stymied by the silent gate, crates of scented soap and hand-prepared bundles of bath salts turned away and sent back to their distributors. A few of the shop's regulars – middle-aged individuals who, like Caril, watched the unremitting ebb of their artistic endeavors and the steady pulse of change in their environments with eyes both outwardly embracing and inwardly horrified, individuals whose real purpose in visiting China in a Bullshop was to commune with one of their own rather than actually commit to a purchase – these individuals would knock weakly on the tin gate, maybe emit a faint "Caril," and then give up, assuming she was conducting some sort of inventory.

However, Mr. Texas-Man was no unadventurous individual, nor one taking of hints, and when the requisite limp knock and whisper failed to produce Caril, he banged on the gate harder, made it shake and clang, he elevated his voice in a high sloping "CA-ril?" And, failing still, he knelt and tilted his head in order to see through the window, called out again,

"CARIL?"

Everything on the shop floor was clear to his sight, glinty shards of broken clay and ceramics – gaily-colored and plentiful and chaotically spread about like arrowheads – and it was so bright in there, like outside but even clearer and brighter, and he saw her slender, freckled feet slowly pad towards the door, heard the door open, gentle rustle of chimes.

Suddenly the gate drew up with an earsplitting rattle.

"Hello there, *nosy boy*..." Caril's voice was playful but slurry, enticing in an inebriated, swinging, Rita Hayworth as Gilda sort of way – her hair now colored a loud, fire-engine red, the dye still visible on her ears, staining the skin on the back of her neck where it had dripped. *Yeah*, Texas-Man thought, *it was sort of...different*. But that whole Gilda thing, he liked it, yes he did, and "little Texas-

Man” agreed with him.

“Hi...cool hair!”

She luxuriously ran her fingers through her messy locks. “Oh, *this*? Yeah, you know, when you dye your hair, it gives it extra body, because it strips the outer layers of the hair follicles, *bends it on all sorts of directions*...”

She got closer. Texas-Man got harder.

“R--really? I didn’t know that...”

“Why should you? You don’t have any hair! But that’s okay, bald men turn me on. They make me *hot*.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah...in fact...if you had any more hair, I’d make you shave it all off – in *front* of me.”

The man stole a quick look behind him, in both directions, to check if anybody was witnessing this. Then, the coast clear, he asked,

“Urm – can I come in? For a second?”

“Only if I invite you in first!” she giggled, beeping his nose.

The two went inside. While Caril stepped out to once again pull down the gate, Texas-Man looked in disbelief at the volume of broken dishes, pots, cups, glasses, and sculpture that littered the grounds.

“Whoa, uh...what you have here, an earthquake?”

Caril leaned against the closed door, demurely kneading her delicate spotted foot against an overturned bowl. “Yeah, maybe a little one. Actually, it’s inventory. Actually, it’s for the insurance money. I’m sick of retail. I was going to stage a *break-in*...”

“Oh-ah, y-you’re serious? You’re kidding, right?”

She began to take sweeping, confident steps towards him, gracefully avoiding the rubble.

“Um, I don’t knowww...get a settlement, move to some exotic country and make...art.” She sidled up next to him and proceeded to pull down his shorts.

“Oh-ah, well, I guess it’s okay, then, I mean...t-there’s this Zen saying about impermanence, you know, like about how I should picture this cup or dish

as being eventually smashed to bits, you know, do it now, because...” She began burying her face in his neck, kissing it, sucking at his flesh. “...it’s going to be eventually smashed to bits anyway...all this broken stuff is okay, because it was going to happen even – oh yeah, Caril baby, *I really want you...*”

He rained kisses on her forehead, on her eyes, as she still worked at his neck, nibbling at it, grabbing at his underwear.

“Mmmmm...I want you too, baby...nice underwear, it feels so rough, *manly...*”

“It’s made of hemp...”

“Great – after fucking we’ll light it up and *smoke* it.”

“Oh-ah, yeah...yeah...I...I know this sounds kinda dumb but...I really have to hit the head, before we start.”

She reluctantly plucked her mouth off of him, a ring of saliva hanging on his skin.

“All right...when pee-pee calls!”

He almost ran to the bathroom in his excitement, praying to God that the release of urine didn’t trigger off anything else – he didn’t want his spunk wasted on the laminated Kabbalah Tree of Life poster above the toilet. He never noticed Caril staggering up behind him, lifting with some effort the cherry-red Buddha above her head. In the few seconds before she sent the statue raining down on his skull, Texas-Man had just enough time to look her in the eyes, questioningly.

Her answer:

“I’m a vampire...*I’m a vampire!*”

She said it in such a manner as if it was self-evident – why she did it, what she was and how she got there. On the sink rested an empty box of Rainbow Maniac hair-dye in No. 5.

“I’m a vampire, I really *am...*”

Caril slid her fine dappled hand across the trail of blood Texas-Man had left on the tile as he fell, fascinated by the design it made against the porcelain. Then she crouched down and began chewing on his neck, using the dark pink hickey as a road map, tugging at his flesh until it gave.

*** **

The Captain had a big ass, but it wasn't fat – it was muscular. If you managed to get between her and her skintight indigo Calvins you would notice that there were no dimples to be found on her ass, none at all. This ass was solid, a strong, big ass. You could, I suppose, kill somebody just with the muscles from her ass, like if you were an assassin and stuff. But she was more practical than that--which was why she was The Captain and you're not.

"You're gonna come out of there right now or I'm gonna cutcher balls off!"

Her palm was thick and white; when it hit something solid it flooded red, a phalanx of red capillaries exploding. One day in the midst of an argument with her husband/client Kinky Witter, she slammed her hand against the closet door of his dressing room. The particle board gave way under the force of The Captain's hand, and Kinky, who was ensconced within said closet, let out a tiny little croak of horror as a vertical sliver of light from the split in the door crossed his face.

"No." Kinky mock-meekly replied, entertaining thoughts of The Captain playing "helicopter propeller" with his dick, a ruler, and a rubberband.

"This is NOT a FUCKING JOKE, you worm, you less than worm, you *shit*, you you you..." The Captain continued to slam her hand into the door, the crack spreading across its middle. With each shot the collection of medals pinned to her fringed leather jacket shook, images of assorted Communists and Nazis immortalized in cloisonne shivering.

Kinky remained huddled in his closet, clad in nothing but a pair of black fishnet stockings and stiletto heels, his clammy, flabby arms wrapped around his head in despair. "I'm gonna fuckin' DIE...gah!" he wailed.

"That tears it! We're never going to those psychic readers again! Do you hear me? It was just some fucking cards!"

Kinky emerged from the closet, sooty clouds of mascara staining his cheeks. His curly purple hair rested upon his scalp like damp wilting snakes, the mousy brown of his roots extending out to nearly an inch.

“Four psychics! *Four* of them! How could all four of them be WRONG?!”

The Captain grabbed Kinky’s doughy face on her hands, smushing it like he was a sharpei.

“SHUT THE FUCK UPPP!!!”

Kinky’s bright pink face slackened under the cradle of The Captain’s hands. He was nearly a foot taller than her, and bigger, a lot of it being fat that he had picked up over the last fifteen years, clean-shaven belly hanging over his stockings. When he’d started being Kinky and putting on the dress he was quite the androgene, almost seamlessly falling into the role, but years of medication, booze, and Hostess Snowballs had turned his flesh to marshmallow. And the smell of his testicles filled the whole room.

“Oh, o-okay...”

“Now. If you have four turds all lined up in a row, doesn’t make them God’s truth now, does it? They’re still turds, right?”

“Okay...”

“Doesn’t make it God’s truth.”

“Right. Okay.”

“Good. We’ve got this new reader coming by tomorrow after the show, She’s gonna do your cards. It’s going to be fine, and then we get on the plane to Osaka. Right?”

“Right. Okay.”

The Captain eased her charge into the chair in front of the mirror and swabbed away the black streaks under his eyes.

“Right as rain.”

“Rain. Right. And I’m not going to die?”

She began to apply the blue stardust eyeshadow onto his puffy lids.

“Nobody is going to die. Especially you. You’re *Kinky Witter*.”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Now, pucker up for me: sexy bitch, c’mon, sexy bitch-dog.”

The Captain applied scarlet lipstick to his pout.

“Mnnnn, that’s right, sexy-bitch alert, bingbingbing...Now do Karen

Carpenter, do *Karen* for me...”

Kinky sucked his cheeks in like a fish as she swept over them a huge brush dripping with rouge.

“That’s right, do Karen, Karen Carpenter, you’re singing songs about heartbreak and really living them, and you won’t eat! *You tragic sweet sexy bitch*. Beautiful. Now get up, let me dress you.”

She lined him up in front of the full length mirror, pulled out a black sequined evening dress with a low neckline. He eagerly pulled the sheer cloth to him and buried his face in it.

“That’s right, Kinky, mommy’s sexy panties! Mommy’s been a real slut in Las Vegas, fucking one nameless man after another, and this dress was made out of her *panties*, hundreds of them, slaughtered and stitched like minks!”

He squeezed himself into the gown, the cool feel of the fabric sending goosebumps up and down his body, his breath drawing shallow and stuttering as if somebody knifed him.

*** **

Tara Amadeo woke up around noon on the couch of her shitty Williamsburg apartment without incident. She had recently taken up residence in the livingroom after crowding out her bed with books, papers, food wrappers, crystals, dirty clothes, the contents of an old purse, and several stale *gris gris* bundles the functions of which she had long forgotten.

“Oh, what – fuck. Huh? *Friday*? Huh.”

Tara raked black worn fingernails through her long brown clump of hair and reviewed the message her dream had just given her: “Friday is a good day to die.” Normally, dreams are just flotsam, the rotting detritus of a mind – but there was nothing normal about this mind, and she didn’t mind.

“Well,” Tara thought indignantly, clicking on the TV remote, “as long as it’s not me or *Alex*...won’t do no good for the Celebrity Death Pool, they’ve locked me out for unfair practices, the fucks...” She proceeded to watch the Andy Griffith

show, and this was her first time watching said program, and she concluded after viewing it that it was a much underrated show, and felt so strongly about this point that she called up her roommate Alexander Platt and told him so.

“I mean, they were doing things with pacing and camera angles that were just not done in those days – pretty innovative shit, when you think about it.”

Platt was canvassing the Seaport on rollerblades, handing out business cards that featured a cartoon of a happy witch on a broom. In the witch’s hands were a fistful of dollars and a red glowing heart – not a real heart, mind you.

The card read:

Broke? Lovelorn?

You Need MAGIC!

Tara A., professional 7th degree witch.

All major credit cards accepted; cash even better;

No personal checks, please; blessed be!

Platt was a little man with curly blond hair and flaxen blond eyelashes, his skin the creamy white consistency of mayonnaise. He wore an orange-and-pink spandex biking outfit that boasted a host of corporate insignias and hugged his tight butt and sack of coins rather snugly; a heavy gold chain with a big pendant depicting the continent of Africa hung from his neck. He talked to Tara on a red Nokia cell phone that was purchased by the bounty the witch on the card was holding; said bounty being a fistful of dollars.

He confused The Andy Griffith Show with Green Acres, and this horrified Tara, who really shouldn’t have drunk Harvey’s Bristol Cream right out of the bottle like that. “You know, Barney Fife – Don Knotts?”

“Mr. Ferley!”

“Yes! Well, this show took place before Mr. Ferley became a landlord, waaay back when he was still living in the South...”

And thus Tara began to weave a tale about an idyllic town called Mayberry, where life was good and the fishing holes clean. “Barney was this arrogant, high-strung sort of guy who always thought he was smarter than he was and got his ass kicked for it. The sheriff never let him carry a gun because

he was afraid he'd fuck up. The shit was *funny*." She told Alex about Barney Fife and Aunt Bea and Floyd the Barber and Opie, and how Opie grew up to be Richie Cunningham and how Richie Cunningham grew up to be Ron Howard who directed Apollo 13.

Alex, who was sitting on a bench across the street from the lady who paints herself green and poses as the Statue of Liberty, enthusiastically and quite genuinely remarked: "I loved that movie!" Alex was a man who very much lived in the Now.

For the record, Tara never saw Apollo 13, but she liked the number 13, as it was a powerful numerological device that could be wrapped around a spell like nobody's business. Then she took another swig of the Bristol's and her mind stumbled into thoughts of Jacques DeMolay. Was the room getting smaller, was there a bare-assed Lovecraftian demon picking his toes blandly on the armrest?

Perhaps working from home was not the best arrangement for Tara. I think she could have benefited from a structured, supportive environment, an assemblage of her peers to greet her as she stepped into the door at 9 AM. Unfortunately, an assemblage of her peers would have meant assorted shamans, witch doctors, stigmatics, remote viewers in the employ of the CIA, psychic friends in the employ of Dionne Warwick, alien-abductees, Tibetan monks, and effeminate Latinos in shiny suits.

"AL-ex," Tara said, raising her voice as if to rouse her best buddy from the trance that she herself had stepped in.

"Yep?"

"It's not *Friday* is it?"

"Oh no, it's Tuesday."

"Ok. Speak to you later – happy pimping!"

Tara hung up the phone, put the TV on mute, and stared up at the waterstain that looked like Jesus's head on the ceiling.

"Maybe ultimately there's a good reason for all of it," she thought, before quickly replaying in her mind the details of the dream and falling back to sleep.

*** **

Dream Journal Entry #5078

10/9/02

I enter the diner where I was to meet my history teacher from Junior High. He's not there, but Molly Griep is - she's in a booth and I sit across from her. She looks like when I first met her, granny-glasses and a ponytail and a face full of freckles. She takes out a dime and very purposely slides it across the surface of the table towards me - sliding it hard and slow so it makes a noise. "Have you seen the newspapers?" she asks. I admit that I threw out the newspapers along with the money. "When Sister Veronica found out about the windows she withdrew the school from the competition," Molly says gravely, accusingly. I dig into my pocket for some bills for the waitress, motioning like I'm going to leave - I'm insulted by Molly's insinuations. She seems a little taken aback and wonders aloud, "What about Friday?" I'm in shock - how did she know about Friday? I have very specific information that I was carrying with me about Friday, but the demons don't want me to say it. I know I'm going to get it if I say it aloud, but I do anyway:

"Friday is a good day to die."

The tentacles start to break through the tin roof like tissue paper, they wrap around me and pull me out. They shoot into my brain, disintegrating me, everything solid in my sight breaking up into atoms, fizzing away.

Commentary: Try to sleep through Friday. Spread some florida water & hyssop about the four corners & evoke Hestia. Just to be on the safe side, evoke Kali as well and bleed a little for her. Make sure Molly is still in the asylum.

*** **

Tara's first appointment was with Evie Carpenter. Alex escorted Evie to the Temple, also known as the room Tara slept in for several nights because she was either too lazy or drunk to clean off her own bed (the pillow and damp bedsheets promptly balled up and thrown into a closet). The room was decorated with artifacts and geegaws from all sorts of cultures. These artifacts varied in levels of real and imagined magickal significance, but the very act of juxtaposing these items in such a haphazard fashion – a bronze Ganesha rubbing shoulders with a plaster Christ rubbing shoulders with a double-pointed crystal charged with the trembling magick that lept from Tara's fingertips as she chanted Celtic verses that she did not completely understand but which sounded really *cool* – produced an occult environment that crackled like fat in the pan. And such an environment even impressed hardline skeptics such as Evie, whose skin bubbled goosebumps as she entered the room.

Tara looked at Evie and did a quick, cursory reading of the woman in her mind. Evie was 42. Evie smoked two packs a day. Evie had a gangly 16-year-old son who was learning kung-fu. He also smoked pot. Evie did not smoke pot, but some of her boyfriends did. She had many boyfriends, and they were all very young. Some were almost as young as her gangly son who was learning kung fu. Sometimes she would beat up on her son. Sometimes her son would beat up on her using the ancient art of kung-fu.

Evie was a little overweight, a little haggard in that way only middle-aged lifetime smokers could be. Evie had a tattoo of a winged, flaming heart with a sword through it. This tattoo was on her inner thigh, right up where her snatch was.

There was a name on the flaming heart: "EMMANUEL."

Evie would live for another five years. One day, a boyfriend would stab her three times in the head with a steak-knife because she wouldn't give him money to buy heroin.

Evie came in today because she was afraid of losing Hal. Hal was the most important thing in her life at the moment. Hal was an unemployed gentleman of 18 years of age. His mom died of breast cancer when he was six.

Evie was supporting Hal until he got back on his feet again.

When Evie was at work, Hal would go out to the park and engage in anonymous sexual encounters with other men.

Evie worked as a token clerk. She would stick decorations on the bulletproof glass of her booth to celebrate the various holidays. Since it was October, she had cute little Frankensteins and Draculas and witches and skeletons to greet the morning commuters as they headed into the station at 8:00.

Tara felt goosebumps bubble up on her arms.

She stopped looking at Evie directly, because it was wrecking her mind.

Do you understand why Tara drank so much?

“So!,” Tara said in her bright, slightly manic customer-service face. “What can I do you for?”

“I think my man’s been cheating on me. I want...you know, something to teach him a lesson, but not kill him or maim him permanently.”

“How about crabs?”

“Can...you see if he’s cheating on me for sure?”

And when Evie said “see,” she put her index fingers to her eyes and wiggled them around.

Tara closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She spoke without opening her eyes.

“I can assure you, he’s not sleeping around with any women.”

Evie was so happy to hear that, she got all misty and brushed back a tear.

*** **

Tara’s next client was Tanya Stubbs. She was a small, intense lady.

“Hi! What can I do you for?”

“My man’s been cheating on me.”

“That sucks...what an asshole!”

Tanya was valedictorian in high-school. When she was eight she picked

up her sister's goldfish and scraped off its scales with a butter knife, then dropped it back in the tank and never told anyone. She had a two-inch scar on her back from when the doctor removed her mole, and it was very deep in her skin and they had to cut a lot. She liked Fig Newtons.

"I want his dick to turn black, then fall off. Then I want him to die."

"How about crabs?"

*** **

But by far the highlight of Tara's career was when people with a lot of money would want her to do readings or workings, because they would usually buy dinner. Such an individual in desperate need of her services was the well-known transvestite punk rock singer Kinky Witter, whose management secured the witch's services in order to allay his fears of an early grave. Tara's mind swam at the possibilities, the dinner she would have, dinner with fine bread and expensive wine, linen napkins, dinner with all these extra dishes and silverware that she didn't even know the function of, venison, roast beast, brontoburgers, banana splits, bloody steaks, loads of salad to admire and not eat, *dinner dinner dinner dinner...*

Alex pulled up the zipper to her purple and gold Mandarin dress.

"Dinner," he said helpfully.

"Dinner!" Tara yelled, throwing her hand up in victory.

"And Kinky's a really famous guy, too."

"Oh who cares, as long as we have DINNER!"

Alex pulled her hair up and secured it with a pair of chopsticks.

"Dinner," he said again, smiling beatifically.

"Oh, if they have seafood I'm going to piss myself! Oh, mussels!

MUSSELS!!!"

Alex handed Tara her antique brocade purse with the chain strap, tarot deck nestled inside its fraying satin bowels.

"Dinner," he agreed.

“Dinner!!!”

Alex put on his pink pleather cowboy hat and led Tara out the door, taking a quick scan of the apartment to make sure all the lights were off.

*** **

Kinky Witter opened the show with “Flesh Aliens,” his big hit from 1979. Though it took a bit of prodding to remove him from his dressing room, as was the case every night, once upon stage he held his audience intimate, bunched them up cozy within his hands. It was easier for him to do these smaller venues, easier until the insecurity and paranoia that he was a big talentless loser started to kick in. That’s why after the two-week engagement at the Velvet Puppy The Captain was hustling him off to Japan, where he was appreciated, where oceans of perky Japanese dyed their roots orange and sported ill-fitting Chanel rip-offs in tribute, pelting him affectionately with foam curlers and tampons upon his arrival. “Crazy Musical Housewife,” they called him.

Tara slouched at the bar, discovering to her delight that she could continuously drop Kinky’s name to acquire free beer, not unlike the happy rat who figures out that hitting the shiny square mounted on the cage will yield unlimited crack. The show went on behind her, her associate Alex Platt, his cowboy hat respectfully planted in his lap, sitting amongst the crowd of mostly 40-something women in ancient Kinky Witter T-shirts.

Alex, she thought with a smirk. He can appreciate anything. A lackluster concert by a transvestite has-been. The company of other people. Humanity.

There was only one thing Tara appreciated. Free dinner. She also appreciated free breakfasts, free lunches, and free drinks. And free cigarettes.

Her armpits sweated profusely within the dense synthetic material of her Mandarin dress. She savored the heaviness of chest, the swimming of brain, the prelude-to-a-stroke sensation that made her feel complete. She wagged her hand at the bartender, bangles chiming. The empty mug.

“Kinky,” Tara said nodding her head towards the 49-year-old crooning on

stage.

Tara pointed to her gaping, empty mouth.

“Kinky,” she repeated. Limply picking up the mug and putting it back down so it made a little noise against the counter.

*** **

“Are you sure this isn’t going to dull your...*psychic powers*? For the reading?”

Tara regarded The Captain, regarded the thick white hand squeezing her shoulder. The witch instantly hated her, hate that would be blazing and vibrant in its quick irrationality if not for the fact that Tara was an alcoholic and hardly able to string together sentences.

“Nah, this is actually opening my chakras. I need to be loose. If I tighten, it’s like I can’t set my...duck. Straight. Rabbit.”

“What?”

“Jacques DeMolay?”

The Captain clamped her hand flat over the rim of Tara’s beer and looked at her in disgust.

“*Listen*. Don’t you flake out on me now, not when I have to get Kinky on a plane to Osaka in six hours.”

“Okay, okay, I’m just actin’ silly, no big whoop, no problem. You have nothing to worry about, I only give accurate and truthful readings – straight from the heart.”

The woman’s face softened, but she still would not release the mug, despite Tara’s casual attempts to pry it out of her hands.

“Well, I heard you’re one of the best. But even though, I was thinking...”

The Captain moved closer to Tara, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I was thinking that, well, the last four psychics Kinky went to, they kind of picked out the wrong cards for Kinky, the *scary* cards, and I’m sure that was coincidence. In fact, I *know* it is, because I really don’t believe any of this occult

bullshit. No offense, I just thought I'd be candid with you. But just in case you might, by sheer chance, get some of the scary cards too, I was thinking maybe you could set up your deck so it wouldn't happen..."

"You mean...fix the reading."

"*Mnyeah.*"

Tara straightened her posture and folded her arms in seriousness, jerking for a moment as she almost lost balance and sailed right off the stool.

"Look, I'm sure you don't think much of me – how I carry myself, what I do for a living. But. What may be 'occult bullshit' to you is my *religion*, and if there is anything I can't do, it's make a mockery..."

The Captain calmly pulled a checkbook out of her jacket.

"A hundred extra?" she asked flatly, bored even.

"It isn't about the money when you're talking about religion, what I believe in, what I believe to be the ineffable tr—"

"Three hundred?"

"Can you put a price on ancestral lands? On my sacred totem animals? These aren't parlor tricks, they are my belief syste—"

"Five hundred? Six hundred?"

*** **

Tara took care when shuffling the cards to mind the bent corner that signified the start of the "happy card" sequence. She sat directly across from Kinky, so close she could clearly delineate in her sight each grain of glitter in his blue nail polish. The wax blotter that covered the table was plastered with the remains of the meal Kinky, The Captain, his entourage, and Tara and Alex devoured. Tara in particular was quite visceral in her dining habits, almost literally diving into her bowl of curry mussels, tossing the mollusks in her mouth like they were cracker jacks, swallowing them whole, scarfing them dripping with spice from her hand, pausing every now and again to present a specimen to Alex, commenting on its uncanny resemblance to female private parts.

Kinky for his part was kind of fascinated with the monkey splashing about before him. It was the same fascination that led him to the other four psychics, only this time he could feel in his gut that this was the one. That she was for real. That the creature who sloppily decimated seafood and pasta and pastries and bottle after bottle of wine was some sort of idiot savant that could actually reach out and borrow a bit of the fire of heaven and bring it back to the mortals and give them a glimpse of the Truth.

Tara was in position. The first “happy card,” The Lovers, was resting face-down on the surface of the pile, awaiting its placement within the sequence that would reveal the future of Kinky Witter, glam rock superstar (in Japan).

The inside of the witch’s mouth grew moist with pre-vomit as each card was turned.

The Tower. The Devil. Death.

She could acutely feel The Captain tense, feel the anxiety rise in Kinky like heated mercury. She cringed at her own embarrassed, high-pitched laugh and reshuffled the cards.

The Tower. The Devil. Death.

She shuffled again.

The Tower. The Devil. Death.

Again, this time quietly dropping the three foul cards in her lap.

The Tower. The Devil. Death.

Alex’s soulful blue eyes glanced from the three cards in his best buddy’s lap to the three on the table. Tara turned all the cards over, recoiling in panic as she saw they were all Towers, Devils, and Deaths. She didn’t look up at her audience, didn’t want to see the mask of terror and dismay that she knew was surely spreading across Kinky’s face, that she knew as she unfortunately knew almost everything.

The Captain’s livid voice shot across the table.

“Is this some kind of sick joke?! I can have you *sued* over this, do you know that?”

Kinky said nothing, staring at the cards on the table as if hypnotized,

mouth opening and closing wordlessly, stunned hands wandering over to Tara's side of the table and grazing over the cards as if they were a whole library shelf full of new and strange titles. He then reached across the table – the clatter of stray silverware, sauce and spilt wine smearing across his dress, torso wriggling like Johnny Eck – and dug his fingers around Tara's throat.

*** **

The black nylon of Kinky's dress tore under The Captain's frantic attempts to pull him off of Tara. The grip was unbreakable, it was as if his pasty hands had grown onto her pasty neck and shared veins so vital to life that to separate them would require the work of a skilled surgeon.

"YOU EVIL BITCH! YOU CURSED ME! YOU KILLED ME! YOU SATANNNNN!!!"

Kinky alternated between loud bellowing denunciations involving such talk of demons and curses and God as he never managed to string together all the years of his life and tear-filled guttural cries of sorrow punctuated now and then with "*Ay, Mommy!!!*" His meaty back, peppered with moles, was so slick with perspiration that The Captain could barely get a grip, and if it wasn't for the members of their entourage and a couple of burly barmaids, a chorus of hands pulling at limbs, trying to pry open digits stiff with rage and fear, Tara would have most certainly have fell over in her chair dead. As it was, her face had simmered into a dangerous mauve color.

"Stop it, you big...*galoot!*" Alex pleaded, continuing his series of pebble-like punches along Kinky's shoulders.

"*Don't you hit him!*" The Captain countered, now up and kneeling alongside her husband on the table, one knee square in a puddle of mashed potatoes, managing to hook Kinky's head by the chin, a few fingers in his mouth.

"He's killing her!" Alex looked around the restaurant in desperation, trying to discern any signs of possible assistance, but nobody seemed to care. Suddenly he caught sight of a light being spectacularly reflected off of metal, a

her. Kinky and The Captain looked at her in disbelief. Panic again did its dance up Kinky's spine, making his heart and hands tremor.

"What...what the hell is *this* still doing here?! *Holy Jesus!* Get this fucking witch away from me! *Mother of God!!!*"

Tara, her disrupted hair falling in her face like raw, tangled threads, the dried foam of spittle still shining on her lower lip and her chin like white moonskin--

"You can't do that to me...WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?"

Alex poured his arms around Tara's waist in an attempt to pull her away from the encroaching Captain.

"Get the fuck away! Can't you hear? You horrible witch!" The Captain screamed, stepping in front of her trembling husband and making a motion with her thick hands to push Tara away.

"Weeeelll, just as soon as I get *paid!*"

"Paid? Ha! You'll get nothing from us. Not one cent, you stupid cunt! Now *go!*"

With that The Captain pushed Tara, her intention being to push this nuisance in gradual bursts until she was safely out the door. But Tara punched The Captain square in her left breast, sending her stumbling backwards in shock and pain.

"Fuck you, you fucking cow!!! You can't do this to me! You can't do this to me!"

What followed was a carnival of hitting, cursing, projectile saliva, broken plates, and, somewhere in the fray, a loosened bladder. At some point two members of the entourage and a waiter managed to restrain Tara and throw her bodily out of the restaurant, but by then the massive quantities of wine she consumed during the meal made everything blink in and out of time – and she stared up from the pavement, Alex pulling at her limbs, noticing, with wonder, how the stars made a formation not unlike the face of Rob Lowe.

Behind them the palm trees that flanked the door of the restaurant rapidly drained of color and then from colorless to grey to the black of rot, withering

spent like the ash from an incense stick. So too the violets in the window boxes.

In her prime, a few years ago, Tara would have beaten them all, would have set snakes and spiders raining from the ceiling and had Kinky & The Captain vomiting ostrich eggs--

*** **

The manager of Les Archies set two cappuccinos topped with whipped cream and cinnamon in front of The Captain and Kinky. At the smell of the beverages Kinky looked up from the ball he had curled himself into on the chair and began to slide his unsteady hand towards the mug. The Captain slapped his hand and growled to the manager sharply,

"He can't have any caffeine, he gets panic attacks. Take it away."

"Umm, perhaps Monsieur would like one of our herbal teas?"

"We're about to go soon, just give us the check."

"I'm not going anywhere!" Kinky cried, ducking his head down and making his fetal ball even tighter.

"Umm, there is the little matter of...*the damage*."

Indeed, the table where hours ago they had sat down to dine with Tara Amadeo and engage one last time into the dabblation of the occult looked like the eye of a nuclear blast, the devastation of broken dinnerware and spilt food radiating outward.

The Captain threw a credit card towards him, the disk of plastic bouncing off his somber white jacket and forcing him to bend down and disengage it from the rubble.

"Here's your fucking money. Go to town, I don't fucking have the time to even *care* anymore."

She shifted on the chair, sighing, noticing an opaque sticky substance obscuring her hexagon-shaped Joseph Stalin pin. She scratched the crap off of it with her fingernail, looked over at her cowering husband, shut her puffy eyes.

"God-*dammit*!"

Suddenly The Captain got up, walked to Kinky, and softly tugged on his ear.

“C’mon honey, it’s time to go.”

“I’m not going.”

“We have to go, right now, or we’ll miss our flight.”

He looked up at her in distress.

“It’s the motherfucking plane, don’t you see? It’s gonna go down!”

She playfully, maternally stroked his hair, lingering just enough on the locks so they tugged at his scalp and slightly hurt.

“Nothing’s going to go down. Everything is fine. We’re going to get on the plane. You’re going to take your pills, and when you wake up, you’ll be safe in Osaka.”

“I’m going to die. It’s for real, for real, I can feel it...”

“Nope. Everything’s fine. You’re going to live to be an old man. Let’s go.”

“You saw what happened today! What the hell was that?”

But The Captain’s tranquil, reasonable voice, the insanity of which even she cringed at, gleamed back at him Stepford-like.

“Nothing happened today, dear. We just finished our last show at the Velvet Puppy and had a nice meal to celebrate.”

“*The cards!*”

“What cards?”

“The cards! The *tarot* cards!”

“What tarot cards? What are you talking about?”

“Tamara Avocado!”

“Oh, that woman who was here? That was just an entertainer. That wasn’t real. Nothing happened.”

“Buh-but...look at...everything...everything...broken.”

“What broken?”

“Everything, muh-my dress...ripped...”

The Captain wiped some grit away from the corner of his mouth, tugging downward on the skin, exposing a few teeth and the pale pink gums.

“You tore it backstage. You tore it backstage and you didn’t mind, because we were late for our dinner and you had so many other pretty pretty dresses waiting for you, waiting packed in your suitcases. That’s all. Everything’s fine. Right as rain.”

He took one last glance at the destruction about him before canceling it out in the light of his wife’s soothing voice and steady touch. He asked for his medication, or rather, some of the many pills he took, asked for the ones that were his particular favorites and The Captain dutifully picked them out of the green lucite Medicine Minder, and he drank them down and in several minutes was ready to go, and they went, The Captain calling ahead to the theater to get the bags ready and out front. And they decided to stroll to the theater, never minding the palm trees and the violets – Tara and Alex long gone-and they strolled, into the beautiful black night, and when they got to the theater, a tall woman in a long, white coat stepped out of a car, a long new calfskin white coat with white fur trim and a big fur-lined hood with two pullstrings with big white fur pompoms, and she dropped the hood, bright red hair blazing, and it took a while for Kinky to realize who it was, it was almost like a joke.

“Cuh-cuh-cuh-Caril?”

*** **

Caril Merrywether looked grimly at Kinky Witter and said,

“We have to talk about Rachel.”

Kinky felt like a specimen with a nail through it, his lower jaw stuttering in the beginning of a sentence that The Captain, pulling out a business card from her jacket, never let him start.

“I’m sorry, but any questions of this nature can be given to our attorney, Mr. Harcourt Watrkiss...now if you would excuse us, we have to go, sorry, thank-you.”

Caril, expressionless, made no motion to accept the card offered to her; The Captain let it fall at her feet, then turned around with Kinky and walked

towards the door of the theater. Caril watched them, then took a small silver gun from her coat pocket and blew The Captain's left foot off.

*** **

"You know what I'd do if I had a dick, Alex? I'd stick it in between the pages of Vanity Fair and fuck my brains out."

Tara just loved browsing through magazines, they were the best way to end a night of tragedy. She loved the heft of magazines thick with advertisements, magazines glossy with artful photos of well-known celebrities, magazines replete page after page with the shibboleths of a culture that was as apropos to her as an Eskimo's 60 different words for snow.

Every once in a while she'd spy a cover with a delectable human on it and gesture and say,

"Mmmm, uh-huh! Yummy! Smackity smack!"

Then Tara suddenly held on to one of the magazine racks and held her left foot out in agony.

"*Aghh!* Foot cramp! Foot cramp!"

She kicked off her shoe and watched in horror as the sole of her foot nearly folded over in half, muscles rigid in pain.

"Walk it off, Tara!," Alex coached, throwing down an issue of Town and Country. "You have to walk on your foot!"

"Gnnnah! This fucking *hurts!*"

"Shake your foot!"

"Gagh! Gannnnagg!!!"

Her hands dragged over the faces of several magazines, mauling the covers, as she slid to the floor of the shop and cradled her foot. The old Pakistani man behind the counter looked at the duo with concern.

"Your friend, she need to go to the hospital?"

"Oh no, " Alex said apologetically, shaking his head. "She's fine, she gets these cramps every once in a while."

Tara rolled over on top of her stomach and threw up a crow.

“S-she gets *lots* of things...”

*** **

The Captain was stretched out on her back, her right leg bent and her left splayed to the side. Her foot was hamburger, terminating somewhere after the ankle, the toes that made it past total annihilation resting some distance away.

Kinky held his hands out in front of him, a weird half-smile on his face, the pills dulling the correct perception to be had of all this, of this whole day – the pills contributing to his failure to crack this particular Ovaltine decoder riddle.

“You...you dyed your hair...”

Caril unconsciously stroked her crimson locks, the other hand still firmly holding onto the gun that was pointed straight at Kinky.

“Yeah, I did. You like it?”

“Looks really punk. Rock n roll! Crazy!”

“I’m...not...CRAZY!!!” Caril screamed, tightening her hand on the trigger.

The Captain moaned from her prone position,

“You’re...not...crazy. Kinky, tell her she’s not crazy.”

Kinky nodded his head, that sounded good.

“Not crazy, right. Okay. Caril, you’re not crazy.”

“Thanks,” she answered, trying hard not to blush and trying unsuccessfully, it was the first cordial thing he had said to her in eighteen years.

“You’re welcome.”

“But we’re going to have to figure out what to do about Rachel. She’s a very sick girl. And I’m not going to have the time to take care of her like I used to, what with my new occupation.”

Kinky just stood there, rather stupided up by the pills, catching his wife’s faint words and delivering them up as his own.

“Ask her what occupation, Kinky...keep her talking...”

“What occupation, Caril?”

“Well, I’m a vampire now. I belong to a very important clan, the clan of the Nosferatuians. A sect of the Nyghtbringers. Of Avalon. Sir Lancelot was one of the first vampires, you know.”

“Oh! D-duh did you hear that honey?”

Caril’s face creased in fury.

“*To hell with her!* What about *me*? Why did you leave? I just want to know why you left. I just want a good answer.”

The Captain swallowed hard on acrid spit, rocking her head from side-to-side in despair:

“Oh s-shit, anything but this fucking question...”

“Oh shit, anything but this fucking question.” Kinky repeated.

*** **

The crow was alive but in a state of hibernation, wrapped in a milky white membrane. It throbbed within its thin, sticky package as it slowly roused to consciousness. Alex spied the storekeeper pulling a gun out of his cigar box.

“Wait, w-we’re going now, we’re leaving,” he said, helping Tara stand, scooping up the crow.

The elderly man chanted some guttural words over and over again as the two ran out of the store. The incident with the crow had so touched him with revulsion and fright that he had truly considered shooting the woman, but the desire not to be caught in another’s mythology stopped him in time. Sometimes it’s best just to pour bleach on the glutinous spot on your floor and call it a day.

Meanwhile, Tara and Alex kept ran down the street, turning a corner onto the quiet, abandoned sidewalk of a residential area. There Tara vomited up three more crows and a sort of hedgehog. Then she put her bent fingers to her temples and groaned.

“I’m seeing something...it’s like somebody wrapped film around my head and my head is like the fucking projection wheel.”

“W-what’re you seeing?”

“Blood...bluh-blood burping out...of an *egg*?”

Tara fell onto the sidewalk grabbing her head just as the first crow, waking from his slumber, peeled back the membrane with its sharp, ebony beak and flew out from Alex’s arms--fly-flying, flying, flying right into the brick facade of the apartment across the street, falling dead in a little red and black pile with a low *pwud*.

“I’m seeing it again, Alex!”

Then,

“I’m seeing it again, Alex!”

Then,

“I’m--“

*** **

“I want to *know*, Kinky! I’ve been asking myself this question for almost twenty years, Kinky! Why? Why did you leave? I need a good answer, I really do, or I’m going to have to shoot you, Kinky, I’m going to have to shoot you and then drink all your blood so I can keep *surviving*! You hear me?”

“Caril, gosh! I was fucking stoned most of the time, I didn’t know my head from my asshole, what city I was in next.”

“That’s no excuse! There are plenty of stoned nice people in the world! Like Keith Richards!”

“You want the truth? Well, the truth is, giving up being a father to little Roxanne was one of the hardest sacrifices I ever made! I realized that the life of a rock n’ roller’s no place for a little girl. I was just hoping you’d forget about me and find a real man to be a daddy to Rhonda...I did it for her.”

“Crap! Crap crap crap! *Next!*”

“Okay, the truth...at the time, I thought I had this life-threatening disease, see, and...”

“Crap! Crappity crap crap!”

“I had this spiritual dilemma, and I needed to seek God in India...”

“Crap!”

“My grandmother was ill...”

“Crap!”

“I was involved in this sting operation, to catch these hashish dealers, and I thought it best if I hide out for...”

“Crap!”

“All right!!! You want the truth? Is that what you want? I’ll give you the fucking truth...”

“No, Kinky,” The Captain said in a small, weak voice, “don’t do it, tell her you’re gay or something instead, don’t tell—“

“Yes, Kinky, I want the truth, That’s all I want. I don’t care about the answer itself. It’s just the fact that you’re *honest* with me...”

“Oh, for the love of God Kinky, don’t say—“

But he was back in time, fucking Caril in a hotel room, pounding into her love-mound on a glittering beach, getting oral backstage at a concert. It made him feel young again, these misty watercolored memories, these arguments without solution.

“You want to know why I left you? I left you because—“

“Yes?”

“Oh God d-don’t do it, Kinky..”

“—*I wasn’t in love with you anymore!*”

Kinky’s brain-matter rained upon the Captain, it poured in her eyes, slicked up her jacket.

*** **

Tara grabbed Alex by the collar as she tried to stand up, flimsy jelly doll’s legs...

“AL-ex,” she said, some albumen from the vomiting dripping down her chin, her eyes wild. The remaining two crows had hatched and committed suicide against the same brick wall as their comrade minutes ago; the hedgehog-looking

thing waited patiently in the middle of the street for a passing car and was soon not disappointed.

“Yep? You okay now Tara?”

“Alex—*what day is it?!*”

“Tuesday. Why?”

“It’s not Friday?”

“No...why?”

“My dream said Friday is a good day to die...”

“But it’s Tuesday.”

Tara looked up and shot an accusing, angry glance at God.

“YOU MEAN THERE’S MORE?!”

GABRIEL'S VISIT

Frank always felt that there was something “wrong” with Mia, but he thought that a life of uneventful domesticity, coupled with an occasional trip to shrinks and the pharmacist, would have cured the wrongness – and if not “cure” at least beat back into harmless latency. With the woman’s presumed kidnap & attack earlier in the year, her husband had held his breath for the worst – that such an event might propel her to the edge of sanity, one nervous breakdown too many that not even a psychopharmacologist’s battery of prescriptions would be able to counter.

But as the wound on Mia’s neck healed, so too apparently did her mental sicknesses – her panics and murky, undefined fears, her shynesses, paranoias, and inexplicable, inarticulate dissatisfactions with life. It was so that Frank hardly knew what to do with her at all, he had never known a Mia free of melancholy and hesitation. It was as if the tall brunette before him was a *stranger*, a completely new woman, a chick he had picked up at a bar – and such a situation initially made his penis quite hard. They fucked virtually every night, sometimes in the morning as well, sometimes in the afternoon as well on his days off – her willowy but strong thighs gripping him tight, her vulva drawing him in deeper and deeper, her almost alien eyes running quick over his face, his body, scanning, searching, insatiable.

Indeed, he had experienced something similar in his encounters with the now-unnamable, the Unspoke Of, the denied, the erased – Myra Banes. But there was something...*realer* about the way Mia did it, something in those brown eyes, from brown to gold and almost as if a light was shining off of them–

Frank Cefalu had misgivings and questions deep within his mind, deep in

the place where he was an authentic human being. But he spoke to no one about them, which was the way these things were done.

He did consult his partner, Billy Rooke, on the topic of whether a man could get “too much of a good thing (if you catch my drift),” but it sounded kind of faggoty, for a man to complain of such things, to bemoan a sexual bounty. This admittance of coital fatigue, of the sensation he got every time his wife clamped her pussy firmly over his dick and milked the very *prana* out of him—

And when it was over, when his limp member lay crooked and spent between his legs, she’d simply roll over onto her side and use the vibrator, like he wasn’t even there (though in all fairness, she did invite him to perhaps jump in and give her some oral in the middle of it). The door was never closed for her, for this woman whose former favorite sexual exclamation, “it’s too big!,” was not a compliment but an urgent medical concern. Such a sudden change of heart, from frigid to furnace – it didn’t add up, and it bristled against Frank’s sensibilities of logic and order. But he spoke to no one about it, which was the way these things were done.

Oh, he did mention to his doctor about those quick, darting pains in his chest that he was getting as of late, and expressed concern that perhaps Mia’s overdone amorous attentions and demands might give him cardiac arrest – but after a full blood workup & examination it was determined that all Frank had was a little case of panic, nothing serious, nothing a daily regimen of Paxil couldn’t cure.

*** **

Mia tossed her issue of Cosmo on the floor and curled up next to Frank. Her put down his brand new Dean Koontz novel, held open carefully as to not crease the spine, and regarded his wife.

“What’s up, hon?”

She squirmed sensuously against his bicep.

“Just *thinking*...”

“Bout what?”

She turned away and mischievously covered her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Mnnaw, I shouldn’t say.”

He started reading Koontz novels a few months ago.

“No, tell me. It’s okay.”

“I can’t...”

“No, what, tell me...”

“Mnn, I just *can’t*.”

“What, you slept with another guy or something?”

Mia turned around and looked at Frank with bemused surprise.

“What?”

“You know, it happens; you could tell me.”

She mock-hit him in the chest with a quick light punch.

“Hey! You know you’re the only guy for me...”

“I’m just kidding, Sweetheart. So what’s on your mind?”

“I’m too shy to say...”

“What shy? You’re my Wife, we should be able to share everything.”

“Okay...it’s...a *fantasy*.”

“Fantasy like Lord of the Rings, what?”

“No, silly – a *sexual* fantasy.”

“Hmn, now I’m kind of intrigued. What about?”

“I can’t say...”

“No, tell me.”

“I really can’t.”

“No, tell me.”

“It’s...it’s stupid...”

“It’s not stupid. Tell me.”

“Guess!”

“All right...does this fantasy of yours involve...another woman?”

“No, I’m not into that.”

“What about that school friend of yours?”

“I’m not gay! *God!*”

“You could be bisexual.”

“Frank!”

“Well, there goes *my* fantasy – oh well. Next guess, uh...does it involve a back-door entrance?”

“A what?”

“Anal sex?”

“Ew, no! Yuck.”

“So no double penetration?”

“No!”

“Does this fantasy involve...spanking?”

“No...”

“Bondage?”

“No...”

“You pleasuring yourself while I watch?”

“No...”

“Sex in public?”

“No...”

“You don’t want to see me get it on with another guy, do you?”

“No way...”

“Strap-on?”

“No...”

“Black guy?”

“No...”

“Whipped cream?”

“No...”

“Videotaping?”

“No...”

“Um...four-legged creatures?”

“Oh my gawd, no! That’s *disgusting!*”

“Just trying to cover all the bases, honey. Orgy?”

“No...”

“Pissing?”

“Yucky. No.”

“So no shit stuff either?”

“NO! That’s so *gross*, Frank.”

“Well that’s good – I don’t like the shit stuff either. Geez, I’m wracking my brains here...feet? You like licking shoes?”

“Nonono. Sigh. Should I just tell you?”

“You should.”

“I can’t. I won’t tell you. Forget I mentioned it.”

“Don’t do this to me, hon. I won’t be able to sleep. This is cruel. Tell me.”

“No.”

“I won’t be able to sleep unless you do...”

“Well...”

“Yes?”

“It would really turn me on if...”

“Yes?”

“...I could cut you and drink your blood.”

“Whuh?”

“It would be with a razor blade, wouldn’t really hurt.”

“Are you still taking your medication?”

“It has nothing to do with my medication, Frank. It’s just something...I saw once in a movie, and I got turned on.”

“H-honey...that blood stuff, that’s how you get infections and diseases...”

“I’d use a fresh razor, right out of the box. Besides, it’s not like some casual sex thing, we’re in a monogamous relationship. There’s going to be no AIDS.”

“No. No way. C’mon, this is *crazy*...”

“Please. I need to do it. I’m so *horny*, just thinking about it.”

“I don’t believe this...it’s going to hurt!”

“You’re a big strong guy, Frank; this is going to be a shallow, tiny little cut!”

“And then you’re gonna suck the blood out?”

“Lick, suck, you know...”

“No, I don’t know, Mia, please *enlighten* me...”

“I’m going to take the razor and cut you on your arm, say. Then I’ll lick up the blood, just to taste it. Then we’ll fuck. No big deal.”

It began to sound so reasonable. That shit that was reflecting off her eyes, it didn’t help him fight it. It was some sorta shit you can’t see. But there it was.

“A-are...are we going to do it *here*?”

“Why don’t I draw you a nice, warm bath?”

“O-okay...”

And so Frank began letting Mia cut him in discrete areas and drink his blood. But he spoke to no one about it, which was the way these things were done.

*** **

Gabriel Baxter inspired feelings of domesticity in Officer Frank Cefalu that he didn’t know he was capable of. He was a wan, slight lad who looked about 16, large blue eyes accented with dark bags that made him look at once like Precious Moments figurine and a TB-carrier. Cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, truancy, lack of parental supervision, Frank reasoned. His clothes always looked too big and slept in, and somewhat dirty, and his abundant dirty-blond hair stood up in some places and were matted down by lack of washing in other places. And yet he wasn’t disgusting. His disheveled appearance was frosted in a youthful veneer that made him the sort of lad you wanted to get closer to, to teach him football, to tousle his hair and call him Sport, to take credit when the scamp graduated from Boys Town and headed down the aisle and took the golden award in his hands and turned back and pointed at you and winked and said, “It was thanks to *you*.” These were the types of feelings Gabriel inspired in Frank.

Gabriel could inspire other types of feelings in people, as well. But those were *bad* feelings from *bad* people, and we won't talk about those right now. Right now, we're going to talk about tae kwon do.

"Tae kwon do," Frank said to Gabriel, carefully sounding out each word. They were standing on the West 4th Street subway platform, lower level. Gabriel wore a faded periwinkle-blue hooded sweatshirt over a white undershirt and wrinkled khakis. He had a pair of suede Pumas with no socks on. His face was a Botticelli angel reproduced on a velvet canvas and sold outside a consignment store among the toy motorcycles and inexpensive baby clothes on 14th Street.

"A martial art is great," Frank continued, "it can give you a lot of self-confidence, a means of self-defense, and it's really a lot of fun."

"I should try that, yeah." It was 5:00 and the boy was wandering the subways as usual, when he should be doing homework, supposing he actually went to school, supposing he actually attended school. In the beginning, Frank would give Gabriel a hard time about all this, but he became afraid that he would scare the boy off, lose him to the anonymous crowd of indeterminacy. So he developed a casual, easy dialogue with the youth when he saw him, bringing up alternatives without cramming them down his throat.

"So like I said, I know this guy who runs a tae kwon do class at the Y, really nice guy, you don't have to pay anything. You want to start taking the classes, you let me know. I'll call him, we'll set it up."

Gabriel, pale sooty hands in pockets nodded.

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea one day..."

And so Frank patted Gabriel on the back and told him to be good, and Gabriel said he would and shuffled down the platform, his small frame vanishing amidst the commuters and the ugly iron columns breaking down into rust and layers of peeling paint.

Poor Gabriel, Frank thought. What a fucked-up kid.

*** **

Later that night, while playing darts at a bar with Billy and some of the other officers, Frank came up with a breakthrough.

He turned to Billy, who was holding a bottle of Samuel Adams in one hand and a sharp, yellow-finned dart in the other. Billy's eyes were focused on the bright red dot in the center of the circular board.

"Bill, I think I've figured something out."

"What? About your sex overflow?"

"No, asshole – about the *kid*."

"Yeah? What?"

"Well, what if he saw a *real* family in action, right? What if like I invited him over the house and he had dinner with me and Mia and we showed him what it would be like to have a stable family situation?"

Billy kept adjusting his hand forward and back, frustrated at not being able to get a clear shot at the bright red dot. "I see what you mean."

"*Right?* I think it'd be good. Poor kid probably never had a sitdown meal with a real family, never had a role model, never had anybody teach him about football, never had anybody to take him camping. You know, maybe shoot a few squirrels."

Billy let the dart fly. Speared the bright red dot right in its bright red heart.

"Awesome," Frank said.

So the night ended. Bullseye, family intervention. Not bad for two drunk off-duty cops in their late twenties who were getting older before their time.

*** **

Gabriel liked to walk long distances with no particular itinerary. He liked to find shiny things in his winding path and pick them up and keep them in a box in his room.

He liked meeting new people, though they never remained as specific memories. There were too many, and they weren't particularly all that different from one another.

A couple of female Japanese students on vacation approached Gabriel and asked him if he would take a picture of them standing in front of the statue of Prometheus at Rockefeller Center. He said "sure" and they handed him the camera and as they were handing him the camera one pointed at the little "flash" button and the little "click" button and explained how the focus worked and they stood back and smiled self-consciously, arm-in-arm, as he peered into the lens and maneuvered it so the women and the fountains and the statue were all in the frame, and he pressed the right buttons and the women thanked him and giggled as they walked off, talking about the boy who looked like the guy in Titanic. Gabriel continued to walk, and he walked into a bookstore, and he looked at the books, though books had no meaning to him and he got propositioned by a man who offered him a grand to come home with him and suck his cock. Gabriel demurred and walked away, but the man followed him but eventually he lost the man and it didn't matter.

Gabriel walked a little further.

*** **

Gabriel watched the ducks swim in the lake from a bench in Central Park. A woman in her mid-forties sat down on the bench beside him. She had a stack of papers on her lap, and a yellow marker. It was after work. Her firm sold lists. They bought the mailing lists of some companies, and sold them back to other companies. She used to be a professional dancer. Jazz and tap. Her husband used to write for Esquire in the Seventies. They were a very beautiful couple, and looked very good when they were fucking. I mean, some people fuck and it looks all messy and not good at all. But they really looked good when they fucked. Currently he was on location in Colorado working on a true-crime novel about JonBenet Ramsey. He kept waiting for someone to be arrested, so he could write Chapter Fifteen. He was 54 years old and smelt like nicotine and rubbing alcohol. She had thick black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her suit was made of green wool and her stockings were a burnt orange. The skin was sagging here and

there, detaching from the muscle and gathering together in soft crinkly waves, but overall dancing had kept her in decent shape.

“Hi,” Gabriel said.

“Hi, there. It gets dark early this time of year, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s getting closer to winter.”

The two looked out into the navy-colored water in silence.

Then he motioned to the papers in her lap. “These are lists.”

“What sort of lists?”

“Mailing lists. You know, junk mail.”

“What’s junk mail?”

“You know, junk mail. Ads asking you to buy stuff. Your mom probably gets them all the time.”

A large, thin white bird landed in the water. It was so thin that when it turned sideways it almost disappeared. It arched its back and enormous wings unfolded.

“What type of bird is that?” Gabriel asked.

The woman never considered herself to be a wildlife expert, so it surprised her that she knew the answer. “It’s a crane.”

That’s when she really noticed the creature, and how beautiful it was, and a smile broke across her face,

“It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

As she continued looking at the bird she caught a glimpse out of the corner of her eye of a homeless man slowly walking down the path, stopping at garbage cans and poking through them with a hand stained dark with filth, and the brisk rattle of the can and its contents stirred her anxiety.

“Well, it’s getting late. I better head out. You too, I suppose...not safe here after dark.”

Gabriel looked up at the woman and shrugged. “I’ll manage.”

The homeless man passed them unnoticed, large and plodding with a limp, and headed down the path out of sight.

"Wait," said the woman. "You don't sleep out here, do you?"

Gabriel looked up at the woman.

*** **

The woman's apartment was small and densely furnished in formica tables and deep orange plush seat-cushions swathed in yellowing plastic. Twin velvet lampshades terminating in modernist amoeboid shapes flanked the living room, the centerpiece being a giant photograph of the woman in her twenties, striking a reflective pose whilst dancing in ballet pinks and whites, ghostly in unfocused light and film that turns colors in age and cracks finely on the surface.

A big black binder overflowing with ephemera in plastic sheets lay atop the coffee table. Gabriel knelt beside the table and looked inside at the photos and news clippings. He frowned slightly in unrecognition.

"Who is this all about?"

She emerged from the kitchen and motioned at the binder sharply with dismissal. "Oh, that's just *JonBenet*..."

Gabriel, who was finely calibrated to detect female discomfort from several fathoms away, asked, "You know her?"

The woman laughed.

"*Know* her? She practically ran off with my husband."

She's been drinking, Gabriel observed. *That makes her all warm and softable.*

"Where's your husband?"

He could smell that sweet scent of stale brandy and hot mature pussy.

"Colorado."

(Meanwhile, her husband was stranded in some Godforsaken frontier hippie place, a place where there were no decent magazine racks. The young man with the Bay City Rollers haircut behind the counter shook his head apologetically. "Nope, sorry we don't carry Esquire.")

No matter, the jaundiced man thought. *Only part of the charm of this*

bumblefuck backwater, only part of the charm.

He took out a tiny black tape recorder out of the inside-pocket of his brown suit jacket and approached the clerk.

“JonBenet! Your thoughts...”

“What do I *think*? What do I think like *how*?”

“What do you think about this tragedy happening so close to your own backyard?”

“Well...it’s pretty fucked up, I guess.”

And when the jaundiced man transcribed it, he wrote:

“Well...it’s pretty f***ed up, I guess.”)

*** **

Ah! To feel his smooth, bony hands run down your back.

“Do you feel less tense now?” Gabriel asked, without the slightest hint of guile.

Her green blazer was folded and draped over one of the orange seat cushions, and the woman perched on the coffee table as Gabriel rubbed the palms of his hands under her white silk shell.

“That’s *wonderful*. You should open up your own private practice.”

She draped herself across the table and laughed, making sure to throw her head back so her black hair splayed in every which direction.

He came closer, close enough so he was leaning over her. There was something so...cuddly about all this, something that made her lie back hot and happy, content.

She asked lazily,

“What’s your name, anyhow?”

“Gabriel.”

(Meanwhile, back in Colorado, her husband trudged back to his pea-green rental car--or as he liked to think of it, the “JonBenetmobile.” The passenger-side & backseat were stacked to the ceiling with binders, towers of paper, TDK audio

tapes, and yellowed newspapers. Three years worth of research. Living day-and-night the JonBenet Experience. And contrary to what you might think, he wasn't happy about it – in fact, the images of her gagged, strangled body, coupled with the attendant implications and possible motivations of such a crime, were a poison that spiritually contaminated him, drove him to drink harder in the face of such an evil. All for a book. If the book was successful, that would have been great, get him noticed again – but at what price? And as the years went on, it seemed as if he had accumulated nothing but *words*, words not his own peppered with partially-finished chapters that he dove into in fits and starts. *Who really killed JonBenet?* And when he finally managed to finish the book, *if* he finished it – would the question still be relevant?)

*** **

Gabriel thrust his fangs into her soft neck, careful to calibrate his sucking with her lungs' frenzied dragging in of oxygen. Her arms wrapped and unwrapped around his torso like a hydra dancing. In her final moments, his sweaty angel's face strobed positive/negative a hundred times before her eyes, close and far--

Nirvana. *I don't hate you, Gabriel.*

His eyes searched her dead face hopefully.

"Really?"

His fingers played idly within the waves of her hair, forming patterns.

Gabriel Baxter was 31 years old.

*** **

Besides Mia's nymphomania and bizarre blood fetish, there were other...*inconsistencies* (God's bloopers & practical jokes) that marked a change in the woman. For example, she developed some sort of queer allergy that made her skin erupt in hives and blisters. At first it was assumed by her doctor that this

was simply a continuation of her long battle with nerves and was most probably psychosomatic – but as the months passed and the dermal eruptions increased in severity to the point that it almost appeared that her skin was steaming, her physician admitted that perhaps it might be a food allergy instead. A series of tests were performed on Mia, but all came back negative (though inadvertently the lab discovered that she had quite an advanced case of anemia, which Frank thought might explain her recent difficulties with circulation and numbness, as well as her rather pasty pallor) Finally, after several specialists and quite a costly trip out-of-network, it was determined that Mia was simply photosensitive. From that time on, the woman never ventured forth from the Cefalu residence without a liberal dose of suntan lotion – Dermaco's Victorian Allure formula being the most effective for her malady.

Of course, medical issues aside, there were also the rather bedeviling fact that the woman wouldn't cook a damn thing anymore. She of the ever-humming electric stove, the constant dirtying and cleaning and dirtying of dishes, of giant foil trays caked with the fat and grease of a most delectable (and moist!) roast beef – now she could barely be brought to warm up a can of Progresso, her long, pale, slender arm holding the ladle in a most uninspired fashion, carelessly letting the soup spill from its mouth and onto the counter and then not even wiping it up afterwards but instead allowing the oily fluid to harden.

Frank felt he had extended her post-attack "grace period" from cooking and household chores quite enough; and wondered if in fact her lengthy vacation from the rigors of housewifery might have in some way harmed her, robbing her of her identity. All those times he caught her wistfully staring out a window at the other families on the block, or stopped dead in front of the meats section of the supermarket, the cold from the freezing units making her nips stand up straight and bluing her fingers as the digits sat poised fascinated upon a steak or leg of lamb. Such actions, including the hives (he rejected the photosensitivity explanation because it made no sense at all, she never had that problem before) and the blood fetish were just cries for help, yearnings for the life they shared before the ugliness of her attack.

He smiled as he recalled the tender, thoughtful way Mia handled the Kowalskis' baby Jeffie the other day, how she put the apple-cheeked infant close to her face, taking in that clean baby smell, remarking on the vibrant rosy hue of his skin and how healthy he looked. I mean, she was practically drooling over the kid. It was obvious that what Mia really wanted was to have a child, and after a couple years of marriage...why not? Oh, he was always a bit hesitant about jumping into the baby thing, what with her nervous condition and all; he always bought his condoms in bulk. But now that he almost lost her, now that they were both getting a little older, now that he was no longer fucking Myra Banes – it was *time*. And so the ulterior motive of his inviting Gabriel for lunch was exposed. It was a...a *test*. A spur. Spurring that maternal instinct along.

And another thing--

"Mia, the blood stuff was kind of...*interesting* for a while, but it has to stop."

His wife interrupted the 3-D puzzle of the Sphinx she was working on, softly crushing one of the foam pieces between her thumb and forefinger. She looked hurt.

"Didn't you enjoy it?"

Frank, clothed in his old police academy sweatshirt and a pair of plaid boxers, put down his Samuel Adams and sat next to her on the couch, trying to maintain a look of non-judgment over the shivering revulsion of his authentic self (snapshots of the incisions in his upper thigh, his dick shrinking back at the warmth of her tongue as she licked the blood up, up into his crotch...).

"I think...that couples should try a *whole variety* of different sexual practices...."

"*You didn't like it!*" Mia shrieked, her face suddenly creasing in anxiety.

"You fucking lied to me that you liked it! I'm so *embarrassed* now..."

"Mia, you were cutting my skin, for Christ's sake! Who the fuck likes having their skin mutilated?"

She threw the puzzle piece at his chest, her mouth screwing up tighter and tighter in distress.

"*Plenty* of people! Go on Yahoo Groups sometime! And I never mutilated

you – I was very careful! It was tiny baby cuts, for pete’s sake! Diabetics have to prick their skin at least once every day!”

“Oh, Jesus,” Frank muttered, hanging his head down and resting his forehead in his hands. “Mia...it has to stop. I quit. It’s just not healthy, and that’s the way it is, and that’s all. That’s all.”

“What am I supposed to do then?”

If there was ever a time for a great save, he realized it was now. He looked up at Mia, held her left hand in both of his own, his green eyes moist with sincerity. Mia could hear his pulse, moved her thumb around a little bit until it rested on that little throbbing bubble under husband’s skin.

“Mia...I think it’s time we started a family. Don’t you?”

Mia looked back at him blankly, eyes as blank as those of the partially-built Sphinx in front of them.

“But we’re already a family.”

“Yeah, but...I know how much you wanted to have *kids*, and...*well*...”

“Frank, I...”

Then it happened, and it wasn’t something that anybody in the universe would ever know or believe or understand, but it happened, that light shining off of her eyes, that golden light...

“M-Mia?”

“Can we just...can we just go into the bathroom and just do a little cut? Just so I can think?”

What was it in that light that skidded off her irises and seeped into his mind? Was he imagining it? It was like...a *pushing* in his mind, a persuasive intangible quality, and it produced pictures, pictures that were oh-so-reasonable, so reasonable, pictures of his muscular, tan arm, the drag of a blade and experiencing Mia’s thrill in this voyeuristic way which was as if to say it was so reasonable, what she wanted...

Frank quickly looked away and shielded his eyes.

“Goddamit, Mia! *No!*”

He ignored the pleading touch of her hand on his knee, he dragged

himself away from the couch and her stare, dragged away like swimming in concrete, and headed for the bedroom.

“B-but Frank, what am I going to—“

“Nonnegotiable, Mia! That’s the way it’s going to be and that’s that!”

He slammed the door in her face and was shocked even at himself as he instinctually locked the door from the inside. He climbed on top of the unmade bed, shivering, breaking out in a sweat, ignoring his wife’s pathetic halfhearted knocks on the door.

“F-Frank...what am I supposed to *do*? My pillow is in there...how am I supposed to *live*? How am I supposed to live? I need to change into my bedtime clothes...one little tiny cut...”

The man brought his arms tightly to his chest, trying to stem the tide of shivers that ran through his body. His throat became dry, and he began to have trouble swallowing, it was almost like he forgot how to swallow, his throat tensed up and he forced, forced, forced that spit down – breathe...

“Why is it not ok to do what *I* want to do for a change,” his wife continued through the door, “What, because it’s fun for me that makes it *wrong*, right? I’m not allowed to have a grain of happiness...you can’t do this little favor for me...after I put up with you WHORING AROUND WITH THAT BITCH!!!!”

Frank tried to control his chattering teeth, denying to himself all that had happened, blaming the light in her eyes on his Paxil. His doctor said that it would take up to six weeks for the pills to take effect...

He heard a slamming against the coffee table and he knew she just smashed the Sphinx.

*** **

Two days later, long after the puzzle pieces were picked up and thrown out en masse in desperation, long after Mia confessed that she didn’t know what came over her and of course everything is ok, after Frank pretended that Mia hadn’t tried to hypnotize him into opening his veins for her feasting, after the

happy couple feigned amnesia over the whole event and set out to plan for a lunch for Gabriel, Gabriel as a test, as a spur, spurring on Mia's maternal instincts, condoms cast aside and she and Frank fucking like mad...

Two days later, early in the afternoon, Mia threw on a denim jacket and strolled out in the crisp October air, heading for the Kowalskis to borrow a cup of rice. Shore's End was a burgeoning suburb of Long Island teeming with young families, many of them recent transplants from Brooklyn and Queens who were fleeing the (ahem) "urbanization" of their communities in order to find a safe, secure environment to raise their offspring. Children and the artifacts of children were everywhere – indeed, Mia almost tripped on the wheel of a child's red bicycle on her way over to her neighbor's house.

"Sorry!" said a towheaded little girl with elbow pads and a gigantic white foam helmet. Mia observed the girl as she ran up to her bike – she marveled at her ability to observe things now, little details, and it made the whole process of living that more rich and interesting. For example, the girl's helmet had several prismatic stickers of flowers and mermaids on it, as well as her name neatly printed in a mix of capitals and lowercase – HaLLeY. Her choppy, shoulder-length hair was of the dirty blond color that would turn dull brown in a couple of years, a blond by youth only. And she was missing baby teeth, and one tooth in fact had just came out recently, the woman could smell the fresh wound...

"That's ok, sweetie!" Mia said brightly, thrusting her hands in her pockets to protect them from the chill.

Draped from every awning & window were the signs of Halloween, draped on the orange and red and dead leaves (twitching) on the trees. A cardboard jack o'lantern or friendly skull taped to the window of a door was an invitation, a good housekeeping stamp of approval signifying that this was yet another stop along the merry reveler's way where a fresh cache of goodies might be got –

"Mia! How are you?"

Mrs. Kowalski was out in her yard, stringing garlands of candy-corn on the shrubbery, white healthy calf exposed from under her heavy blue skirt, healthy white calf crisscrossed by lines of dark veins, veins silent and underground like

submarines and nice big juicy ones puffed up straining at the backs of her knees...

"Vera, hi!" Mia said brightly, tilting her head slightly to dodge a dry, brown leaf on its decent.

"How's Frank?"

"He's fine...how's Howard?"

"He's fine..."

"Is he home?"

"Oh, sure...he's playing X-Box with the kids."

"And Jeffy? How's he doing?"

"Oh, fine, fine."

Fine. Kill them all and drink their blood; nobody will know you did it.

*** **

"Um...Mia?"

"W-what?"

Mrs. Kowalski looked at the woman quizzically.

"No, nothing...you just sort of blanked for a second..."

"I'm fine," Mia said, her normally cheerful voice tinged with defensiveness.

"I was just...getting caught up in all this...Halloween...pageantry. We sure know how to decorate for the holidays at Shore's End, don't we?"

"Oh, we certainly do." Mrs. Kowalski held up a portion of the garland proudly. "I made these myself."

"Is that a fact?"

*** **

"*Couscous?*" Frank asked, crinkling his eyes in distaste.

"That's what we're having. With chicken."

"I thought you said you were going to borrow some rice from Mrs."

Kowalski?”

“She ran out,” Mia answered flatly, running a felt rag doused with Lemon Pledge over the coffee table.

*** **

Gabriel stood at the threshold of the Cefalu residence, surprising Frank as he returned the man’s hearty, strong handshake with one of equal strength. The vampire was dressed in the same periwinkle hoodie, though the khakis were pressed. He was also considerably less...*smoky* looking, though bits of his hair still stuck up as if he had just gotten out of bed.

“Sorry I’m late...I’ve never been around here before and I kind of got lost.”

“Oh, no problem, Gabe, no problem...did you ask the neighbors? This is a good place here, really good people. You can ask people anything here...kids can play in the street, safe.”

“I asked the neighbors.”

“Oh, good...”

The muscular man in the sportshirt and jeans stood less than a foot away from Gabriel, the two looking at each other in awkward silence as the white noise of Shore’s End droned on, the children playing, the sound of tires slow and purposeful against asphalt. A siren.

Gabriel scratched at the side of his mouth.

“Are you going to ask me in?”

“Huh?”

“You know...I don’t want to be rude and just barge in.”

Frank gripped the shoulder of Gabriel’s hoodie and nearly dragged him inside with affection.

“Jesus, *of course*, no doubt, Gabe. What barging in? Think of yourself as family.”

The sirens grew louder, but Frank paid them no mind; he was so used to hearing them in the City.

As Frank strode to the entertainment wall-unit in the living room, Gabriel wordlessly took in the sights of the Cefalu residence. It all reminded him of how his own house was like, in his first life, and the memories drifted back, memories undiminished by time but possessing only the faintest of sentimentalities...it all wasn't as real as the shiny things in his box, and the connections you make in a blink of an eye and then so quickly ended—

“I got *Super Nintendo*, “ the man said excitedly, pulling at a tangle of black and yellow wires. “Haven't played this in years. You like Super Mario?”

“I never played it. I've played Frogger sometimes.”

Gabriel felt a buzzing at the base of his skull, and he swatted it like a mosquito, but it was still there. It shouldn't have taken him by surprise, but he wasn't expecting...

“*Frahnkkk*,” Mia said in irritation, coming up from the basement with a white sack of mulch. “Do you hear those sirens? Do you *hear* them? What's going on?”

“What sirens,” Frank asked in monotone without looking up, on the floor cross-legged now with the gnarled ball of wires in his lap.

“‘What sirens?’ Don't you hear—“

Mia grabbed the base of her skull and turned her head sharply to the left to meet Gabriel's gaze, two pairs of eyes bouncing light off each other, and in a second Mia could see in her mind pools of crimson satisfaction, and a name could be discerned in the pool on white marble bas relief letters, and the light that shines off the...eye?

Gabriel's sensuous dark pink lips curled up slightly as he took a mock bow in front of the woman.

“*Your majesty*,” Gabriel said reverently.

“Ain't that kid a pisser?” Frank asked, eyes still on the wires, almost managing to separate out the joysticks.

*** **

Mia had managed to admit to herself that things had become somewhat different since that night at the club with Rachel – she had blocked it all out of her mind, but not completely, never completely. But she thought she could handle it, and the quirks, the changes, the cravings, it was all manageable enough. Besides, it seemed as if her psyche had changed along with her body, and she was a stronger Mia now. Even Frank not wanting to do the cutting anymore...she had no truck with cutting herself to obtain the claret, though the sensation of her own blood pouring down her gullet was nowhere near a pleasant or satisfying experience as drinking Frank's, in fact it had sickened her to the point of nausea. But today, with Mrs. Kowalski...and now this strange boy...

"Pass the couscous?" Frank asked, rousing Mia out of her rapid thoughts. She sat directly across from her husband at the mid-sized dining room table, Gabriel between them and facing the glazed life-size statue of a cheetah. But more often than not, the boy's blue eyes were on Mia – boldly, exclusively, pausing ever now and then to mindlessly assent on some point Frank was making, some point about the joys of teamwork or Super Mario or whatnot. And Mia didn't know how she felt about it, but whatever the case, she passed the oblong-shaped white bowl filled with couscous and smiled graciously.

The boy simply didn't inspire bloodlust in her, it was as plain as that. But she was quite strangely attracted to him, and the fact somehow made the bloodlust pale in comparison. Today was the day when she realized she was a complete and total monster. She went into the kitchen to either introduce early the chocolate cake she had made that was cooling in the fridge or plunge a knife in her chest. She smiled brightly at Frank – trying her best to ignore Gabriel's enigmatic gaze – and left the room.

"We'll miss you," Frank said good-naturedly, sticking a carefully-hewn cube of chicken in his mouth.

*** **

And the sirens never stopped, the whole dinner, different brands of sirens

and bells, the police brand, the ambulance brand, even the firetrucks...firetrucks! Mia held herself up by the edge of her metal Kohler sink, wondering, wondering *why would they need firetrucks???*

What if she did something and she blocked it out?

Shit! the baby – shit!

A teardrop plunged from her eye and landed heavy on the silver surface of the sink. In the sink's drain were remnants of the meal she had prepared – bits of chicken skin, grains of couscous, some leaves. She always took care to clean the drain thoroughly between meals, and this day would be no different (she stifled a cry in her throat), this day would be–

The baby–shit!

Her pale face flooded red as the tears fell down, as she let herself mourn for the first time since...the change...long fingers covering her eyes, silent crying, trying to the very last not to cause a scene, not to–

“Do you know who you are?”

Gabriel was sitting on the kitchen table, his left leg bent, knee resting on chin, thin arms folded over his sneakers.

“I-I didn't hear you come in,” Mia said hoarsely, brushing back some snot from her runny nose.

“That's because I'm a vampire. I have faster reflexes and greater stealth than a human. You do too.”

“Vampires..are a television show, Gabriel. They aren't real.”

Gabriel was suddenly standing directly in front of her, his scent reminding her vaguely of a dead mouse mixed with a familiar fruity scent, the scent of her own Victorian Allure sunblock...she could detect no pulse, no open wounds, none of the normal circulatory functions....

“How many times have you told yourself that?” he asked in his usual temperate voice, neither angry or accusative. “I mean, it's obvious what you are now, and it's not a big deal. A lot of people are. It's not bad. It's the way we are made – we can't help it. You should learn to live with it and not worry.”

Mia's pupils dilated as she regarded the boy with the oddly mature

demeanor, felt the linoleum sway under her feet.

“W-where’s....where’s Frank?”

“He’s digging out some old sports equipment in the garage. Don’t worry. I didn’t kill him.”

“Did....you kill any of the neighbors?”

“Did *you*?”

The woman’s mind shuddered in her skull; she let out a strangled yelp and reached for the large knife on the rack. Gabriel’s perfect, alabaster face cracked for the first time, his mouth and eyes suddenly taking on a burden and a sorrow years beyond his terminate age.

“No, *don’t*--“

Mia held the point of the blade at her throat, leaning against the counter, eying Gabriel with tired, red-rimmed eyes.

“I can’t...*deal* with this anymore. It’s too much for anyone to expect me to live with. I’m sorry...”

“This is silly, Mia, don’t you see? There’s no reason to kill--“

Her blade dug deeper into her neck, drawing a thin stream of blood.

“Gabriel...I’m really sorry you have to see th--“

Gabriel ignored the woman and headed purposely for the sink, where he began washing his arm vigorously with the dishwashing detergent.

“Well, I don’t think it’s right, I don’t, but – maybe you’re right, maybe it’s too difficult for us to live...”

He opened the window and stuck his arm through it. Immediately upon contact with sunlight his arm began to redden and steam. Mia forgot about her impending suicide and looked at the boy in alarm.

“G-Gabriel, what are you doing?”

He said nothing, biting his lip as his arm began to erupt in angry welts. Mia reacted to the boy’s self-mutilation in mute horror, unable to move, until finally something broke inside of her, some barrier was hacked down into pieces and she dropped the knife dead into the sink--

“*Stop it!*” she hissed under her breath. “Just...stop--“

Gabriel quickly brought his arm out of the window and Mia tossed a towel over it.

“I would have burned it straight through,” he said.

“You hardly know me.”

“I completely know you.”

*** **

Frank returned from the bowels of the Cefalu family garage sometime later with a pair of shoulder-pads and a football helmet. Mia was sitting on the couch, Gabriel leaning casually beside her. They both regarded Frank with their beautiful alien eyes, but it wasn't something he or anyone else could notice, unless you were one of the species...

“Hey, crew! Found my old junior high stuff! It's a little bigger than Gabe over here, but I think it might fit – did you hear about Katy Hooper?”

Mia's face darkened slightly and she unconsciously folded her arms over her chest.

“W-what about?”

“It's a girl! She pushed it out right on the floor of her own bathroom! Man! Now that takes *guts*!”

Later on, when Mia and Gabriel were alone once again, once again out of the many many times they got together in the days ahead, Gabriel recalled Mia's reaction upon hearing the news regarding Katy Hooper, and cautioned her not to look so guilty all the time, that it would incur suspicion and make The Life more precarious.

*** **

One day Gabriel ran into Officer Cefalu on his beat along the West 4th subway platform. There was no trace of guilt in Gabriel's eyes or mind, because as far as he was concerned, him and Mia were of a different species than Frank.

If anything, he felt the very slightest twinge of pity for the strapping dark man in the police uniform, that this man had no idea who he was living with, and that at some point him and his wife would have to part. It was inevitable, in relations between human and vampire – and as the days passed Mia would fall deeper and deeper into her new state of existence. There was no turning back for her, and he only hoped his instruction and advice made the transition easier; he wanted to give the woman the guidance that he had never received.

“Hey, squirt!” Frank said paternally. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing much...”

“Did you hear about Kinky Witter? Somebody blew his head off.”

“I didn’t hear about it.”

“Do you even know who he is, er, *was*?”

“He wore a dress?”

“That’s the one...when I was in high-school, it was hip to say you listened to Kinky Witter...some songs were ok, but he looked weird, kinda gay. It’s funny, though...I’m getting flashbacks like when John Lennon died and stuff. I’m sure you don’t remember Lennon...”

“No, actually I do.”

END OF BOOK ONE